



YOU ARE
EATING
AN ORANGE.
YOU ARE
NAKED.

a novel

SHEUNG-KING

“I didn’t want it to end.” —THEA LIM

YOU ARE EATING AN
ORANGE. YOU ARE
NAKED.

Sheung-King

BOOK*HUG PRESS 2020

FIRST EDITION

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LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Title: You are eating an orange. You are naked / Sheung-King.

Names: Sheung-King, 1994– author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200294776 | Canadiana (ebook) 20200294857

isbn 9781771666411 (softcover) | isbn 9781771666428 (epub)

isbn 9781771666435 (pdf) | isbn 9781771666442 (Kindle)

Classification: LCC PS8637.H48955 Y68 2020 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.



Canada Council
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Book*hug Press acknowledges that it operates on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. We also recognize the enduring presence of many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful for the opportunity to work on this land.

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For Po Po

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Colophon

Do You Like Pineapples?

I am a can of pineapple. Cop 223 is as well. We're watching *Chungking Express*. On April 1, Cop 223's girlfriend, May, leaves him. Cop 223 lets himself believe for a month that May's leaving is an April Fool's joke. He will move on when April ends. As a symbol, he buys thirty cans of pineapple that expire on May 1. It is now the last day of April. When the clock strikes midnight, Cop 223 eats all thirty cans of pineapple. Naturally, he gets a stomach ache.

After listening to a song on the jukebox at the bar, Cop 223, drunk, decides he is going to fall in love with the next person who walks in. A woman with a blond wig, trench coat, and sunglasses enters the bar. Cop 223 is now in love.

The ancient Chinese scholar Guo Po writes: "At the age of fifty, a fox can transform into a person. At the age of a hundred, it has the choice to either metamorphose into a wizard or become a seducer; it can know of happenings a thousand li away; it can bewitch people, leading them astray and causing them to lose their wits. At the age of a thousand, it can communicate with the heavens and become a celestial fox."

On one of our first dates, you suggest that we go to a zoo to see some foxes. The foxes in the zoo have yet to turn fifty. They walk around on four legs and lie on the ground and smell like skunks.

You smell nice and have the most elegant walk.

"I just went on a date yesterday," I tell a friend the next day.

"How was it?"

"Great!"

“So nice. Where did you go?”

“The zoo.”

“The zoo?”

“Yeah, we saw these foxes—”

“I don’t want to hear about foxes,” he interjects. “Tell me about the girl!”

You prefer wrapping your arms around mine to holding hands. I like it when you do that. It makes me feel like I too have an elegant walk. You enjoy jazz, and your skin is soft.

Back on the screen, Cop 223 asks the mysterious woman a very important question:

“請問小姐你鐘意食菠蘿嗎?” he says in Cantonese. She doesn’t respond. “パイナップルのことが好きですか?” he asks again, this time in Japanese. Still she does not respond. “Miss, I’m wondering if you happen to like pineapples?” he tries in English. The woman sips her whisky and ignores him. Finally, Cop 223 asks in Mandarin, “请问你喜欢吃凤梨吗?”

The woman compliments his Mandarin without looking at him. Cop 223 tells the woman he’s Taiwanese, but the woman doesn’t seem to care. Cop 223 continues talking, tells the woman the person he has been dating for five years just left one day. In hindsight, he feels as if he knows nothing about her at all. The mysterious woman, as you might expect, does not respond.

As the camera pans to the reflection of the two sitting in the bar, the woman says in a voice-over that a person may like pineapples one day and something else the next.

“Do you know about the Panjiayuan Antique Market in Beijing?” you ask. We are in bed.

“No.”

"It's the largest antique market in the city and people from all around the world visit there every day. Because the market is so big and there are so many people, the market's managers used to have a hard time letting people know it was time for the market to close. They thought it'd be impolite to put on announcements telling people to leave, so instead they decided to play a Kenny G song."

"What?"

"Yeah, they play Kenny G's 'Going Home' to inform shoppers that it's time for the craftsmen and sculptors who work in the market to stop working and return home to their families. They've been doing that for years now. If you ask children who live in that neighbourhood what they think about when they hear that song, they'll say that when the song plays, Father will come home to have dinner with them."

At moments I wonder if you are a fifty-year-old fox. Sometimes, when I look very intently, I can see the celestial fox in you. A celestial fox with an elegant walk.

"Shoulder massage, please!" you say. The film is over and we are lying in bed. I carefully pull down your silk bathrobe.

"Ah...you have such nice fingers," you say. "They're long and slim, but they're strong."

I am too embarrassed to respond. Being complimented by a celestial fox doesn't happen that often.

"Can you kiss my back a little?" you ask. "It feels nice."

I start kissing the back of your neck. Your skin is soft.

"Let's listen to 'Going Home,'" you suggest.

As the song plays, I imagine myself a craftsman in Beijing, walking home to Kenny G after a day's work. I open the door to my house and announce that I am home. Kenny G is still playing from far away.

I notice a little mole on your lower back, to the right of your spine. For some reason, at this moment, I feel like I know you.

I put down my craftsman's tools, and my children greet me. I walk to the dining room, and on the dinner table sits some hot rice and vegetables.

I kiss your little mole. You let out a soft moan. Kenny G gives me a wink. You look as if you are about to fall asleep. You grab my arm and put it around you. You smile. I see the celestial fox again, walking elegantly on the clouds.

It is almost midnight on the last day of May. Suddenly I have the feeling that you might disappear once May is over, that you will return to the heavens, to walk on the clouds, leaving me behind. I feel a chill, and all the blood in my body turns cold. I clench my fist and watch the clock turn twelve. I open my eyes. You are still here, next to me. I am relieved, but to be safe I must ask you a very important question: "Do you like pineapples?" I whisper. You are asleep, but I am less than a thousand li away—you should be able to hear me.

Kitchen God

1

"There's a little bit of rice left on your plate," you say.

It is a warm Sunday afternoon in May and we are having Thai food. I tell you a story.

2

Once there was a lord who loved to eat. He sometimes left his palace to find new flavours. One day, from far away, he smelled a smell like none other. He came to the house of a peasant woman. He begged to taste her food. She gave him some sugar cakes. He ate them all. He wanted more.

Peasant: That is all I have.

Lord: Come with me.

Peasant: Where?

Lord: To my palace, where you will bake for me.

Peasant: Why?

Lord: Because I like your cakes.

Peasant: I will not come with you.

Lord: But I am a lord.

Peasant: I will not come with you!

Lord: Then I will hit you.

The peasant had magical powers. She slapped the lord, and the force threw him against the wall.

The lord was stuck to the wall.

The peasant woman placed a curse upon him.
He was to stay on the wall and watch other people eat, forever.

No one knew who the peasant woman was. No one had ever seen such a powerful curse. Not even the Jade Emperor could free the lord from the wall, so the Emperor appointed the lord Kitchen God. His altar was to be found near the kitchen stove of every family in China. Each year, he was to report to the Emperor on every family's doings. The Jade Emperor would punish the families who had bad reports. Every New Year, families offered the Kitchen God small, sticky, melon-shaped candies. His mouth filled with sweetness. As a result, he could only report good things.

Some say the candies simply glued his mouth shut.

3

The Kitchen God also made sure that people didn't waste food. My mother told me that. We had a domestic helper. My parents never cooked. My mother told me children who didn't finish all of the rice in their bowls would be punished. Food left in children's bowls would appear as warts on the faces of their future spouses.

I did not want my future spouse to grow warts. I only put a small amount of rice in my bowl.

When I was eleven, I discovered sushi. I liked sushi because I could finish a piece of sushi in one bite.

Would the Kitchen God be mad at me for eating Japanese food? Was the Kitchen God a nationalist? Or did he only care about food? Nationalism, after the war, made its way into food culture. "The rice in Japan is the most delicious rice in the world," I once heard in a commercial. I agreed with that part of the commercial. Japanese rice was delicious. Japanese people must not have had warts on their

faces. "Those who cook Japanese rice are the happiest," continued the commercial. I am Chinese. I wondered what it meant for a Chinese person to eat Japanese rice.

When I turned twelve, I ate Japanese rice more often. Maybe I was swallowing Japanese nationalism. Maybe I was reinforcing it. What would the Kitchen God think?

I discovered that the Japanese character for rice, "米," has the meaning "the root of life." The Chinese character for rice is also "米," which in Cantonese can mean "wealth."

Rice is nationalism.

Rice is the root of life.

Rice is wealth.

4

"We were all thrown into the world at the start of our lives," said Heidegger. Just as the lord was thrown against the wall, I was thrown into the world. The Kitchen God was stuck to the wall. I am stuck in the world.

I was thrown into Vancouver and moved to Hong Kong at the age of five. It was the early 2000s. I know of some Hong Kongers who were proud of having once been colonized by the British.

Why should I be so proud of where I live?

Some people were thrown into Hong Kong.

Some people were thrown into Vancouver.

The British ate mashed potatoes. I preferred sushi rice. I live in a post-colonial city. I needed to prove that my life was separate from the nation, and from rice. I decided to throw away some uncooked rice. It was an act of resistance.

Uncooked rice is not in my bowl.

The Kitchen God cannot punish me.

My future spouse will not grow warts on her face.

5

Mother: What are you doing?

Me: I am throwing away rice.

Mother: Why?

I explained to my mother that it was an act of resistance. We lived in an apartment on the seventeenth floor. I was throwing rice out the window. My mother struck me with a spatula.

My mother explained to me that throwing away rice was throwing away fortune.

I stopped my act of resistance. That night, my mother told the helper not to serve me any rice. Everyone else was served a bowl of hot steamed rice during dinner. The helper took away my chopsticks and gave me a spoon. Then she took away my bowl and gave me a plate. I had no choice but to have mashed potatoes for dinner. That was my punishment.

The Kitchen God was watching me.

I did not want my future spouse to grow warts because of me.

I stuffed the mashed potatoes into my mouth.

6

It is a beautiful Sunday afternoon. You finish your wine. You reach for your chopsticks. You are blushing a little. You pick up the rice that's left on my plate and eat it.

I reach out to touch your cheek. Your face is perfectly smooth.

You are in the bath, reading a book—something by Marguerite Duras.

You: Can you read to me? I need to condition my hair.

I sit on the toilet and read to you.

Afterwards, you dry your hair. I stand behind you and hold your waist as you apply lotion to your face. Your hair, your shoulders, and your back are warm. I kiss the back of your neck and then the back of your ears. In the mirror, I see that your eyes are closed and I hear a soft moan. Your hand caresses my groin. My penis is stiff; with the tips of your fingers, you start stroking it gently, then you stop.

You: Let's set the alarm first.

Memory Piece: Macau

1

The year is 2014. We are in a hotel room in Macau. We are on the bed. This is our second May together.

You: Your eyes are brown.

Me: Yes, most Chinese people have brown eyes.

You don't respond. You sniff the side of my neck—a long sniff—like you're snorting a line of cocaine. It feels nice.

You: Smell me.

I smell you.

You: Now smell yourself.

I sniff my arm.

Me: We smell the same.

You: We used the same soap—the hotel soap. I wonder if everyone in this hotel smells the same.

The walls in the hotel room are white, and the lights are yellow.

Me: I'm just reminded of something.

You: How you speak is kind of weird.

Me: What?

You: The way you say things is a little odd.

Me: Remember when we were nineteen? When we lived in that old apartment near the campus?

You: I never noticed it before, but there's something strange about the way you talk. What time is it?

Me: Sometimes, when you were drunk, you would flick my dick and just walk away. You'd do that on the street, at home, and

sometimes even when we were at other people's places. I never knew how to feel.

You: It's nine in the morning.

Me: One day, you just stopped doing that. But last night, you did it again.

You: Have you ever gambled?

Me: No.

You: Why do you think people gamble?

Me: I don't know.

You: I don't like people who gamble. I used to date this guy who gambled. It was just a summer fling. He dressed well. I wasn't that into him. I had to leave the country, so we ended things.

Some time passes. You're no longer looking in my direction. You're staring at the ceiling. You're thinking about the guy who gambled, I realize.

I feel like you just flicked my dick and walked away.

2

In Macau, metaphors are part of reality.

All the hotels in Macau have casinos. Shiny silver adornments, shaped like crescent moons, hang from the ceilings; they resemble knives and surround the interiors of the hotel. Some of the hotels themselves look like giant knives. By "knives," I do not mean kitchen knives, but guandaos.¹ If you look up images of the Grand Lisboa in Macau, you'll see that the entire building looks like the blade of a guandao.

The reason for the knife-shaped decor has something to do with feng shui.

There is a slang phrase in Cantonese—*a neck covered in blood*, meaning the loss of fortune. So when I say in Cantonese, "I'm trying

to make your neck bleed,” it means I’m trying to take money away from you. And if, let’s say, I lose a great sum of money at the casino, I would say, “My neck was sliced and it’s bleeding all over.”

Casinos in Macau have giant knifelike decorations because casino owners want to slice people’s necks.

Next to the Grand Lisboa is the Casino Lisboa. There is a cliché in Cantonese that is often used by villains in gangster films—*you will not be able to escape, even if you grow wings*; the Casino Lisboa is shaped like a birdcage.

I look up at the ceiling. There are sculptures hanging from above; all of them have sharp ends. I feel as if hundreds of gold knives are pointing down at us as we walk through the hotel lobby.

You haven’t said a word since we left the room.

Me: Hey.

You: Yes?

Me: You okay?

You: Yeah.

Me: Why do you seem upset?

You: I’m not.

Me: Alright. Let’s go get something to eat. Do you like Portuguese food?

You: Sure.

I try to hold your hand. You pull your hand away.

You: Hey.

Me: Yes?

Pause.

You: Never mind.

Me: What is it?

You: I want to say something, but I don’t feel like talking.

Pause.

Why don't you say something? The silence is making me uncomfortable.

I look up at the knives that are pointing down at us. I recall a story I read as a child.

Me: I'll tell you a story.

The Priest and the Butcher—Part I

There once lived a Buddhist priest. He lived as a hermit in a small cave. He practised austerities. He wanted to purify himself. He wanted to enter the Western Paradise and become a Buddha. He travelled west to seek the Western Paradise and he walked for many days. One day, a butcher came by to greet him.

"Where are you headed, Master?" asked the butcher.

"To the Western Paradise. I am to become a Buddha."

"How wonderful," said the butcher. "A person like me—a butcher, who has drenched his hands in blood his entire life—can never hope to attain the Western Paradise."

The butcher had never liked being a butcher. It was simply a family business, and one must work in a family business whether one likes it or not—or else one's dignity will be lost.

"That is true," said the priest. "You are sure to be doomed. Buddhism forbids the taking of lives. Not only can you not attain the Western Paradise, you are certainly going to suffer in the deepest court of hell."

The butcher thought for a moment. *I am quite unworthy of this life. I wish I could stop being a butcher and live as a vegetarian in my next. The Great Buddha is merciful, and perhaps if I implore this priest with a contrite heart, he will plead my case when he arrives at the Western Paradise.*

"Master," the butcher said with tears in his eyes. "I beg you present my contrite heart to the great Buddha and plead that he reduce my horrible punishment." Overwhelmed with guilt, the butcher got down on his knees.

The priest rolled his eyes and thought, *There is no way someone like him will be punished lightly. But a Buddhist must seek the salvation of all creatures, even butchers.*

“Very well,” replied the priest, “I will present your *contrite heart* to the Buddha when I enter the Western Paradise.”

“Thank you, Master.”

The butcher clutched his knife and, with a single, skilful stroke, he cut out his own heart, handed it to the priest, and died.

You: Alright, stop. That’s enough.

Me: You don’t want to hear the rest of it?

You: Why did you think it was a good idea to tell me a story like that?

I was reminded of the story by the knives on the ceiling, I want to say, but decide not to.

You: Your stories are shit.

4

We are staying at the Venetian. When the ceiling isn’t covered with knife-shaped decors, it is painted a shade of greyish blue (you can tell the paint is cheap), giving the illusion that it is day (if you’re drunk enough) even when it is night.

Me: I want to be away from this hotel.

You: Fine.

Something about this hotel or Macau is probably affecting us.

It is your first time in Macau. My father was born in Macau. Because of him, both my sister and I have Macanese citizenship. Because of our citizenship status, every year we get what the Macanese government calls “cash handouts”—a subsidy to offset living costs—earned from gambling taxes. Permanent residents are granted

MOP\$9,000 (CA\$1,455), while temporary residents receive MOP\$5,400 (CA\$873).

In Haruki Murakami's novel *Dance Dance Dance*, morality and values are described as fashionable. Like putting on a Missoni sweater over Trussardi slacks, it's about mixing and matching, staying fashionable, keeping your values in vogue. "I remember, after my first year of university in Canada, I went back to Macau and visited the casino for the first time," a friend once told me. "I was playing poker, and guess who the card dealer was? My high school math teacher! I felt so uncomfortable. I hoped he wouldn't recognize me, but he did. He smiled to me, a friendly smile that said, 'Yup! This is where we all end up.'"

5

We walk to the lobby of the Venetian, passing the designer stores and an indoor counterfeit version of the San Luca Canal. You take out your phone and start texting. The Venetian is thirty-nine storeys high (casino owners have quadrophobia; they stop at thirty-nine). It has a three-storey shopping mall, selling over four hundred designer brands.

Me: Hey, what are you doing?

You: Texting.

Your eyes don't leave your phone when you answer me. *Are you texting the guy who gambles and dresses well?* I look at what I'm wearing: a white shirt, navy shorts, brown loafers, and a simply designed watch. I don't look overly impressive, but I also don't look too shabby. I shaved this morning, took a shower, combed my hair back, and sprayed on a bit of the cologne you bought me. I check my breath. *I smell okay.*

You: What are you doing?

Me: Checking my breath.

You: Look. As you can probably tell, I'm a little sick of you right now. I don't know why I feel this way, but right now, this is how I feel.

Me: Okay.

You: I have an idea.

Me: What is it?

You: When's our dinner reservation?

Me: Eight.

You: Okay. Let's spend the afternoon separately. I'll meet you at the restaurant at eight tonight. I think I just need some alone time. It's not you; I know how you are and that you'll worry that you did something wrong, so I'm telling you right now that it is not your fault that I'm feeling this way. But it's not mine either. The saying "it's not you, it's me" is not only a cliché—it also doesn't make much sense. That saying is so centred on humans. Maybe external things play a part in a relationship as well, you know? Maybe the air we're breathing, the atmosphere of the place we're in, or the time of day affects how we feel about another person. A person can't be that far apart from their surroundings; we're all part of this universe.

Sometimes I feel as if I can say everything to you or nothing. Maybe everything and nothing isn't that different. Anyway, no hard feelings, alright? I think I just need some alone time, that's all.

Me: Where are you going to go?

You: I don't know. Maybe to a museum or something. I'll see you at dinner.

You kiss my cheek and walk away.

We have just exited the hotel. It is hot. I feel as if my contact lenses have melted onto my eyeballs. It is also humid. My entire body is sticky. You're wearing an open-back orange dress that shows your slender shoulders. I watch as you walk away.

Gambling is prohibited in most of mainland China. Macau is a self-administration region—meaning it is not administered by Beijing. It has its own government and currency. I’m not sure how much truth there is to this but a friend once told me:

“To Beijing, Macau is a non-place.”

“What do you mean?”

“At least for the time being, Beijing has no interest in reforming or changing anything about Macau. Macau has its own currency, yeah? That makes it the perfect place for underground economies to occupy. And because of that, shadowy businesses will move away from Beijing. Everyone’s happy. And did you know that each Chinese citizen is only permitted to exchange up to US\$50,000 a year? That’s how they keep the money inside the country. But if you come to Macau, you can buy chips at a casino and cash out in whatever currency you want. It’s perfectly legal; everyone knows that and everyone does it.”

The official languages of Macau are Portuguese and Cantonese. Street names are written in Portuguese. The Chinese names of the streets have no meaning—the characters are simply phonetics. Only 7 per cent of Macanese citizens actually speak Portuguese.

I am now alone, in a non-place, surrounded by street signs with names that are only phonetics—empty signifiers.

I decide to gamble for the first time. I go to an ATM and take out MOP\$1000 (CA\$130). I walk back into the Venetian. I play a game of blackjack and lose almost all my money in twenty minutes. I decide to stop. I have MOP\$20 left. I use it to buy a Portuguese egg tart. You love Portuguese egg tarts. I miss eating with you. I am sweating. I am eating an egg tart. I am alone. I realize how pathetic I look.

My father is from a wealthy family in Macau. My grandfather was a merchant and a pharmacist. He owned land and a pharmaceutical company during the war. He had three wives and seventeen children. My father is the seventeenth. My father's oldest brother is forty years his senior. I never met my grandfather. He passed away when my dad was twelve. Grandfather did not trust any of his other children with his fortune. My father, only twelve, was to inherit and redistribute his wealth. Being twelve, he wasn't able to do anything. Thirty years later, our family sold the land my grandfather owned to the Macanese government and distributed the money equally amongst themselves.

Grandfather hated the idea of gambling. He had anger issues. If he heard that anyone in the family even set foot near a casino, he'd beat the shit out of them with a bamboo stick. He would do it in the front garden so that all the neighbours could hear and witness it. He would not stop until the bamboo stick broke.

The land he owned is probably a casino now.

I leave the casino and take a cab to the Ruins of St. Paul's.

The Priest and the Butcher—Part II

The priest, shocked, did not know what to do. Since he had agreed to bring with him the contrite heart of the butcher, he wrapped it up and continued his journey.

A Buddhist is not afraid of death. However, he is just as disgusted as anybody by the smell of decay. The bloody heart had begun to emit an increasingly disagreeable odour. The odour became overwhelming. One day, the priest came upon a small roadside temple. Out in front, there was a large furnace where people burned written prayers and paper gifts to be sent up to the heavens. As he approached the furnace, the priest made sure no one was around and quickly tumbled the revolting bit of rotting flesh into the roaring holy flames.

I am not abandoning my promise. The great Buddha will receive the butcher's contrite heart this way, just as he receives prayers and paper offerings. Besides, there is not much hope for a butcher, who will still have to go to the deepest hell and face the consequences of his wicked way of life, regardless of my plea.

The flames suddenly flared up and filled the whole furnace. As the fire roared, a figure appeared—the figure of the dead butcher himself.

"The Western Paradise is neither near nor far," said the figure. "It is located where there is a sincere heart. I have entered the Western Paradise and have become a Buddha. For that, I thank thee."

The Ruins of St. Paul's are the ruins of the front of a church. The rest of the church was destroyed by a fire during a typhoon in 1835. I remember lighting firecrackers in front of the church with my father at night when I was a child.

Suddenly I feel guilty for gambling. Perhaps my father was beaten with a bamboo stick in 1960 because I—my grandfather's grandchild, whom he would never meet—lost MOP\$980 in a blackjack game at the Venetian in 2014.

I wonder if guilt is fashionable?

8

We'd decided to come to Macau because we were visiting my family in Hong Kong and Macau was only a one-hour ferry ride away. You'd never been, and you wanted to visit.

We are scheduled to leave tomorrow morning. We will take the ferry back to Hong Kong, and from there, we will take an Air Canada red-eye flight back to Toronto.

It is now a quarter past eight. I am at the Portuguese restaurant on a beach—where we are supposed to meet.

Out of nowhere, I realize that I don't mind you flicking my dick when you're drunk. In contrast, maybe a part of me likes the fact that you flick my dick and walk away. I imagine you walking into the restaurant, flicking my penis, and just walking away without saying a word. The strangeness and absurdity of this imaginary scene amuses me. I laugh. An old Portuguese couple sitting at a table nearby give me a look. The fact that they're looking at me makes me want to laugh more. I take out my phone and pretend that I just received a funny text message.

While having my dick flicked is not necessarily something dignifying, I can't seem to understand why it is a problem either. I don't take pride in my cock. Though I am pleased with the shape and size of my penis, it is nothing overly impressive. It's just part of me. You flicking it should not make me feel emasculated. We're in a relationship. You're the only person in the world who touches my penis on a daily basis. You should be allowed to do as you please

with it. *Then what was it about you flicking my penis last night that made me feel uncomfortable?* I don't know anymore.

I look at the beach. The moonlight is reflected on the water. At night, when you can't see how dirty the water is, the beach is quite beautiful.

I remember coming here for the first time when I was twelve. It was my parents' anniversary, and we celebrated it here. The restaurant looks exactly the same as I remember it. The walls are made of stone, the tablecloths are red, the wineglasses are thin, and the candles and everything all still look the same. I remember imagining how nice it'd be to have a date here one day.

Eight years later, I'm back. I don't know where you are. Just as it is not the butcher's fault that the butcher's a butcher, something that is out of my control has driven you away from me this morning.

I smell myself. I've been sweating. I no longer smell like hotel soap. I order a bottle of red wine. I pour myself a glass. I finish it. Pour another glass. I finish the bread on the table and half the bottle of wine. It is almost nine. I stare at the beach. A little boy is running on the beach. He disappears into the distance. The beach is empty.

I see my twelve-year-old self shaking his head at me.

I finish the entire bottle of wine. *In Macau, metaphors are part of reality.* I look at the utensils on the table. I clutch the knife. *The Western Paradise is neither near nor far.* I stare at a reflection of myself in the blade. *My eyes are brown.*

¹. Guandao: A kind of Chinese polearm used for close-range combat. Imagine a spear, but instead of having a small shaft at the end, it has a giant blade.

Memory Piece—Part II: Hong Kong

1

After the server asks if I need anything for the third time, I send you a text. The time is eight-thirty:

Me: *Where are you?*

We were supposed to meet at eight. I drink an entire bottle of wine and two glasses of Scotch. At a quarter to ten, you respond:

You: *I'm in Hong Kong.*

Me: *What?*

The restaurant is about to close. I call you.

You: *What do you want?*

Loud music is playing in the background. You are almost yelling.

Me: *Where are you?*

You: *I told you, Hong Kong!*

Pause.

Me: *Why?*

You: *What?*

Me: *Why?*

You: *I'm in LKF.*

Me: *What the fuck?*

You: *I said LKF!*

Me: *I'm at the Hac Sa Beach.*

You: *Where the fuck is that?*

Me: *Where the Portuguese restaurant is. I sent you the address this morning.*

You: *Huh?*

Me: I'm in Macau still.

You: Okay. What do you want?

You've been drinking, I realize.

Me: Who are you with?

You: Friends.

The guy who gambles?

Me: Who?

You: Does it matter? You don't know them.

"Hey, try this. It's really good"—a man's voice in the background.

Me: Who was that?

You: A friend.

The server comes over. I cover the receiver.

"Sir, we are about to close. May I get you anything else?"

"I'll have another Scotch and the bill, please."

You: Hello?

Me: Why are you in Hong Kong?

You: What?

Me: Why are you in Hong Kong?

You: I should go.

Me: Where are you going?

You: Back to my friends.

Me: I didn't know you had so many friends in Hong Kong.

You: Just a few.

Me: You left me here, waiting.

You: I got bored of you, okay? What's the point of travelling if you're not having any fun? So I messaged some friends, decided to meet them in Hong Kong.

I hang up. The server comes over with the bill and a glass of Scotch. I take out the ice and drink it all at once. I want to leave the restaurant right away, but I have no cash—I lost it all playing blackjack. I have to hand the server my credit card and wait for her to swipe it at the counter, walk back with the receipt, and have me

sign it. I am the only customer left in the restaurant. Music is playing —Norah Jones, I think. The music gets turned off before I can tell if it's actually Norah Jones. On the tables are three empty glasses of Scotch, an empty bottle of wine, and some bread crumbs.

The server returns. I sign the bill.

I zigzag along the beach back to the road to catch a taxi. I notice, in my pocket, a small packet of firecrackers. I bought it in the afternoon. I thought it'd be fun to go to the Ruins of St. Paul's to light them with you after dinner—like I did when I was a child. The beach is empty. *"I got bored of you,"* you said to me. I check my phone. I see your Instagram Story—a picture of the Ecuménico Kun Iam² and the tag line *Alone in Macau. Any suggestions as to where to go?* The next Story—a shot of the Hong Kong harbour with the tag line *Hello, City of Lights* 😊. I think about checking your stories on Snapchat but decide against it. My chest is starting to ache a little. Maybe I drank too much. It is now ten-thirty. I don't want to return to an empty room in the Venetian. I go to the Ruins of St. Paul's again. I was raised in a Christian family in Hong Kong. Every week, I was pressured to go to church. Churches make me feel trapped. But this one doesn't. The Ruins of St. Paul's make me feel comfortable. This church is nothing more than a tourist spot.

During the day, the Ruins of St. Paul's are filled with tourists. Three long alleyways lead to the ruins; the ruins are on the top of a small hill. Those alleyways are filled with souvenir stores and bakeries that sell traditional Macanese goods and foods. I remember that I used to walk back and forth in the alleyways, trying free samples of treats until I was full.

I see a man in a baseball hat hanging out near the ruins. I want a smoke. I walk over.

"Hey, do you have a cigarette to spare?" I ask.

"You from here?" He is wearing a black T-shirt.

"No."

"I figured." He lights it for me.

"How?"

"It's easy to tell if someone is from here or not."

"My father is from here."

"But you're not. Where are you from?" the guy asks.

"I live in Toronto."

"Your Cantonese is good."

"I grew up in Hong Kong."

"Why are you here?"

"I'm travelling with my girlfriend."

"Where is she?"

"I'm not sure."

"Huh. Got in a fight?"

"Not exactly."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Really, nothing happened. She just left."

"Interesting."

We smoke in silence for a bit.

"You like Macau?" he asks.

I don't know how to answer him.

"It's strange here, isn't it?" he continues. "Everything here revolves around casinos. Most people work for casinos, and those who don't still profit off casinos. If not for the casinos, none of the independent businesses would survive."

"Is that so?"

"Yup."

"What do locals think about the casinos?" I ask.

"Well, I for one don't really mind them. I mean, because of the casinos, my real estate is becoming more and more valuable. I'm just thirty. I can practically stop working for months if I just sell my single parking spot. So, financially, I have no complaints. Plus, the government gives us money every year."

I nod.

"But if I have kids, I don't think I'll raise them here."

"Why's that?"

"Want a beer?" Instead of answering me, he passes me a Blue Girl.³

"Thanks." I pop open the can and take a sip. "What do you mean?"

"When I was growing up, there weren't many casinos, and we were taught we'd have to be skilled at everything in order to survive in our society. The education system was strict. I remember, because I was bad at math, I had to go to after-hours math tutorials. The instructor had a really particular way of teaching. He had five wooden rulers on the table—each of a different size and weight. If I got a question wrong, he would hit my hand with the smallest one. If I got a second question wrong, he would hit me with one that was slightly heavier than the last. If I got more than five questions wrong, he would just pull my hair and slam my face on the table."

"That's fucked up."

"Yup, he'd slam my face on the table and just walk out of the room. He didn't even show a glimpse of emotion. The room was silent. He never spoke. After some time, it felt as if he wasn't even there—when I got a question wrong, I simply felt the pain."

"Did you get better at math?"

"Not at all. I still failed my math exam. I never went back to the tutorial. A couple months later, the instructor finally got sued and the class got cancelled. But that is not to say I didn't learn anything."

"What can you possibly learn from having your head slammed on a table?"

"I was still terrible at math. I just couldn't understand it. I was good at every subject except for math. For some reason, numbers just don't register with me like language and images do. I'm an editor and photographer for a magazine, by the way."

"Cool. But...I'm sorry, what did you learn from that guy?"

"Getting back to why I will not raise my children here—in Macau."

"Okay."

"There's no weight here. If you graduate from high school, you're eligible to work at a casino. You get paid by the government every year and all you have to do is shuffle cards. There's no weight—no threat that you're going to be fucked if you don't try hard. There's no fear that someone will slam your face on a table if you don't do well enough. The reality in Macau is not the reality of life, for fucking up does not carry much consequences. The government gives us this safety net—money and employment. We are raised to believe we can do whatever we want once our financial needs are met. But Macau is a society of control. We can't escape what they really want us to do—that is, to help maintain what Macau is: a place filled with tourists and casinos. I don't want my child to grow up in a controlled and weightless society. Ironically, I think, without weight and confinement, having ambition becomes more difficult. Sometimes I still think about that guy who slammed my head against a table. I hate him. But I think that having that fear and hatred is sometimes helpful. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, but that doesn't seem too healthy."

"How old are you? Wait, let me guess. Twenty?"

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"I take portraits of people all the time. I can tell how a face looks at different ages."

"Interesting."

He takes out a Polaroid camera. "Here, let me take a photo of you," he says.

In the photo, I am holding a can of beer. I am blushing a little. My hair is a bit greasy from the humidity. I try to smile. I'm smiling, I think. He takes three photographs of me on the different staircases below the Ruins of St. Paul's.

"Here you go, young man." He hands me two of the photographs. "One's for your girlfriend, the other is for you. I'm keeping one for myself."

"Why do you want to keep a photograph of me?"

"Relax. I'm not going to jerk off to you at night."

"I never thought you would..."

"You're probably leaving soon, right?"

"Yeah."

"And when are you going to come back?"

"I'm not sure."

"You don't gamble?"

"No."

"Well, at least there's going to be a photograph of you here."

In my parents' house are several handcrafted plates with portraits of my grandfather painted on them. He wears a silk tangzhuang,⁴ his head is held high, and his hands are placed behind his back. He is bold. These plates were made by the best craftsmen in Macau at the time.

In the picture, I am wearing a shirt with sweat all over it and holding a beer from Hong Kong—a beer that runs commercials that feature only blue-eyed German men. And I'm forcing a smile.

I wonder what you're doing. Maybe you went to Hong Kong because you are bored of the weightlessness of Macau.

Visu the Woodsman and the Old Priest—Part I

Many years ago, there lived a woodsman. His name was Visu. He was big and strong. He lived in a hut with his wife and children.

One day, Visu received a visit from an old priest.

“Honourable woodsman,” said the priest, “you never pray.”

“If you had a wife and a large family to keep, you would never have time to pray either,” replied Visu.

Visu’s remarks angered the priest. The old man gave the woodcutter a vivid description of the horrors of being reborn as a toad, a mouse, or an insect for millions of years. Visu, horrified, promised the priest that he would pray.

Visu did nothing but pray. He did not work. His wife and family starved. Visu’s patient wife became extremely angry and, pointing to the thin bodies of her children, she exclaimed, “Rise, Visu! You fool! Take your axe and do something to help us rather than just mumbling prayers!”

“How dare you?” said Visu. “The gods come first. You are an impudent creature to speak to me so. I will have nothing more to do with you from now on!” Visu snatched up his axe and, without saying farewell, left the hut and climbed to the top of Mount Fuji.

On the mountain, Visu prayed. It was quiet. Visu felt as if all the weight he carried as a woodsman was gone. He felt free. He heard a rustling sound and saw a fox. Visu deemed it extremely lucky to see a fox, and, forgetting his prayers, he sprang up and ran after the sharp-nosed little creature.

The time is eleven-thirty. I call you again, but you don't pick up. The last ferry to Hong Kong leaves at midnight. I take a cab to the harbour. I smell like cigarettes, alcohol, and sweat. There is sweat on my shirt—it feels particularly uncomfortable because of the cold air conditioning and becomes even colder when I enter the ferry terminal—there must be at least a ten-degree difference between outdoors and indoors.

As I'm walking, someone holds my hand for a second, lets go, and disappears into the crowd. I shiver. It's a Saturday night, so there are quite a few people catching the last ferry to Hong Kong.

Before I board the ferry, I go into a duty-free store and buy a small bottle of whisky. I drink it on the ferry. A film is playing on the ferry. A film from the eighties, I think.

Black Rose is wearing black spandex and a mask. Agent 169 is wearing a trench coat over a suit.

Black Rose: I am Black Rose.

Agent 169: I am here to capture you, Black Rose. You must stop killing people.

Black Rose: Those I kill deserve to die. They are criminals, thus not worthy of life.

Agent 169: Who are you to decide that?

Black Rose: You are a weakling. If everyone were like you, criminals would remain on the streets forever. You are no hero; you are but a tool of the state, a commodity of the system. You work for the Royal Police, don't you? I am Black Rose.

Agent 169: You are in no position to punish them. I must arrest you.

Black Rose: You are in no position to arrest me! I did nothing wrong.

They fight. They are equally matched.

Agent 169: Where did you learn such kung fu?

Black Rose: That is none of your business.

Black Rose strikes.

Agent 169: How are you so fluent in such technique? They are moves that were taught to me by my master.

Black Rose: Shut up! Take this!

Agent 169 falls to the floor.

Agent 169: I know you.

Black Rose: Do you, Agent 169?

Black Rose attacks Agent 169 again. Agent 169 is in pain.

Agent 169: I know you.

Black Rose: I have poisoned you. You will die soon.

Agent 169: I know you.

Black Rose: You know nothing.

Agent 169: But I know you.

Black Rose: There is nothing to know. I am Black Rose. That is all.

Agent 169: Allow me to see your face before I die.

Black Rose: You are pathetic.

Black Rose strikes again.

Agent 169: Please. All I ask is to see your face. Am I not even worthy of that?

Black Rose: Why do you want to see my face. You are soon to be a dead person. Do you really want the last thing you see to be the face of the person who took your life?

Agent 169: After I die, they will send someone else to capture you.

Black Rose: I care not. To me, life is a gamble.

Agent 169 is in pain. He tries to get up. He falls down again.

Agent 169: I know you.

Black Rose: You know not what the word *know* even means.

Agent 169: Maybe not. But I know you! I know you very well.

Black Rose: You are pathetic. You don't!

Agent 169 slowly gets up. Barely standing, he takes off Black Rose's mask. Dramatic music plays in the background.

Agent 169: You are Jade, my love.

Black Rose strikes again. Agent 169 falls and dies. The film fades to black.

This might be the worst thing I've ever seen on a screen.

5

I finish the bottle of whisky. On the ferry, people are drinking beer and playing cards. Lots of people are holding stacks of cash.

Once I get off the ferry, I run to the restroom and vomit. I look at myself in the mirror. It is getting late. My contact lenses are becoming dry. My eyes are red. Despite all of that, I feel like I can drink more. And I will. I am going to drink more. Drinking more is what I am going to do. I leave the washroom and head to Immigration. I check my phone. I don't see any messages from you. It is crowded. I feel someone holding my left hand for a second and then letting go.

At the customs booth, I wonder which one of the people in line held my hand for a second. I start looking around, imagining who it might be. A wife who's tired of her husband? A child? A drunk man? After a while, I realize how suspicious I look.

"Sir, are you intoxicated?" asks a customs officer.

"Yes, most people here have been drinking."

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to come with me."

"Wait, what?"

"Are you carrying any illegal substances with you, sir?"

"No."

"Other than alcohol, what else have you consumed?"

"Well...bread."

“Sir, this is not a joke.”

“I’m not joking. I had some bread.”

“Why were you in Macau?”

“I was visiting.”

“Alone?”

“No, I was with my girlfriend.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s somewhere in Hong Kong. She left before me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sir, I need you to cooperate.”

“I don’t fucking know, okay?”

“Sir, calm down. Please, I need you to answer my questions honestly. Why did you come back separately?”

“I don’t fucking know! I don’t! I’m not fucking with you. I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Please empty your pockets.”

I take out my phone, wallet, keys, the two photographs of myself, and the little box of firecrackers.

“What is this?” asks the officer.

“Firecrackers.”

“What do you plan on doing with them?”

“Well...nothing.”

“Again, I ask you to please cooperate. What are you doing with firecrackers in your pocket?”

“I...”

“What is a grown man doing carrying a tiny box of firecrackers at the border?”

“I used to play with them.”

“Sir, please just come with me.”

“Please, I need to find my girlfriend.”

“And where is she?”

"I don't know, okay? I don't know why she left, I don't know who she's with, I don't know why she's in Hong Kong now, I don't know how all of this started. Please just let me go so I can find her! I don't fucking know. Why so many questions? Do you ever ask yourself that many questions? Why this, why that. Why does anything happen? Why are you here asking why I have firecrackers with me and not, let's say, driving a truck somewhere in Norway? You don't know why, do you?"

"That's it. Sir, you're drunk. Come with us."

"Why is this your life? Why are you not a truck driver in Norway? Why?"

"I don't know what the fuck this guy is talking about—take him away," the officer tells his colleague.

They lead me to a room with nothing inside it but a chair. I sit on the chair. They tell me to wait. They shut the door. The walls are white, the lights are white, and the chair is black. My pockets are empty. I am alone in a small room right outside of Hong Kong.

Visu the Woodsmen and the Old Priest—Part II

Visu came to an open space in the woods. He saw two ladies sitting and playing a chesslike game. Visu was so fascinated that he could do nothing but sit down and watch them. There was no noise except for the soft click of the chess pieces on the board. The ladies took no notice of Visu. They seemed to be playing a strange game that had no end, a game that entirely absorbed their attention. Visu could not keep his eyes off these beautiful women. He watched their long black hair and the way their quick little hands shot out now and again from their big silk sleeves to move the pieces.

He finally found a chance to speak when he saw that one of the players had made a bad move. "Wrong, most lovely lady!" he exclaimed excitedly. The women turned into foxes and ran away.

When Visu attempted to pursue them, he noticed that his limbs were terribly stiff, his hair was long, and his beard reached the ground. He discovered, moreover, that the handle of his axe, though made of the hardest wood, had crumbled away into a small heap of dust.

After many painful efforts, Visu was able to stand on his feet and proceed very slowly toward his little home. When he reached the spot, he was surprised to see no hut. He remarked to an old woman, "Good lady, I am amazed to find that my little home has disappeared. I went away this afternoon, and now, in the evening, it has vanished!"

The old woman, who believed a madman was addressing her, inquired after his name. She exclaimed, "You must be mad! Visu lived three hundred years ago! He went away on a summer afternoon, and he never returned."

"Three hundred years?" murmured Visu. "It cannot be possible. Where are my dear wife and children?"

"Buried!" hissed the old woman. "And, if what you say is true, your children's children are too. The gods must have prolonged your miserable life in punishment for having neglected your wife and little children. You disgust me. Leave!"

Tears ran down Visu's cheeks as he said in a husky voice, "I have prayed while my dear ones starved and needed the labour of my once-strong hands. I have lost my manhood."

"Leave, you disgusting creature! You monster!"

"This is my home!"

"You used prayer as an excuse to relieve yourself of the weightiness of work and of your responsibility as a father! You bastard! You creature! This is not your home. Leave at once!"

We do not know how long Visu lived after that. Some say he returned to Mount Fuji to pursue the foxes, and his spirit is still said to haunt Fujiyama when the moon shines.

I look out the window of the little room. The sky is dark. There are no stars. I see grey clouds. I don't even know where the moon is. I think the lights from the buildings are lighting up the sky.

The officer opens the door and tosses my things to me. "Call someone to come pick you up; we can't let you roam around the ferry terminal drunk."

"Okay."

"I'll give you back your firecrackers when someone is here to get you." He shuts the door.

I call you again. You pick up. Where you are now is a little quieter than where you were before.

Me: Hi, I'm here.

You: Where?

Me: In Hong Kong.

You: Where?

Me: In a little room at the border—the ferry terminal.

You: What?

Me: Yeah. They were suspicious of me because I was carrying around firecrackers. I'm stuck here.

You: Why the fuck are you carrying firecrackers?

Me: Can you come get me?

I get out of the little room. The sun is rising. It is misty. It is humid. The sky is somehow bright but grey and starting to look like the fake sky painted on the ceiling of the Venetian. I guess that shade of blue was fairly accurate after all. We are walking on a bridge between the highway and the water. It is almost five in the morning. In two hours, this bridge will start getting busy. On Sunday mornings, foreign workers gather on these bridges and hang out. They play cards, chat, and some even bring karaoke machines. I see people starting to set up tents so they can secure a good spot to hang out during the day.

I grew up here. I left ten years ago. Now everything that was so important to me back then seems distant. I wonder if my spirit will be haunting the streets of Hong Kong when I die.

I'm looking around at the highways and buildings. Most things are made of glass. You look at me.

You: Your eyes are red.

My contacts are dry. I look like I need to cry.

You: I missed you. But I'm not sorry for going away for a bit. I was bored. If I didn't leave, I wouldn't have missed you.

Me: I—

You: I'm hungry. Want to get some breakfast? I heard the breakfast in Hong Kong Island is good. Do you know a place?

8

We go to a Hong Kongese restaurant. There are people in suits and dresses who've been clubbing all night having breakfast here. You and I are sitting at a small round table sipping our yuenyeung.⁵

You: How was your night?

Instead of answering you, I hand you the photo the guy took of me near the Ruins of St. Paul's.

You: You look like shit.

Me: That's nice.

You: What time is it?

Me: It's almost six in the morning.

You: Want to light some of your stupid firecrackers at the seashore before the first ferry arrives?

We go to the ferry terminal. The air quality is terrible. The first ferry is arriving in ten minutes.

Me: Will you leave me alone like that again?

You: I don't know.

We light the firecrackers. The sparks they give off are small and disappointing.

Me: Have you heard of a movie called *Black Rose and Agent 169*?

We sit on a bench facing the Hong Kong harbour. It is damp and the wind is warm. The water is green and the sky is grey. The horn of the first ferry sounds. You are asleep on my lap. We're leaving tomorrow night, and the day after, we will be back in Toronto. I find myself falling asleep as well. My dry eyes are closed. I start imagining the feeling of playing the game the foxes were playing on the mountain. I'm getting better at the game, but the game

continues. The game never ends. I'm tired but I keep playing. The fox smiles at me. *It is a game that entirely absorbs people's attention.*

You: Why do you want to marry me?

Me: Why?

You: What is the reason behind you wanting to marry me?

Me: Well, there could be many reasons.

You: Is it because you want us to be in love forever?

Me: I mean—

You: 'Cause that's too much.

Me: What?

You: The idea that we'd love each other forever is too much for me. I can't handle that.

Me: It's too much?

You: What if I get sick of you one day?

Me: I actually never asked you to m—

You: I can't promise that I'll love you forever. I might, but I can't promise you. I might get sick of you or I might fall in love with someone else, you know? And it's not my fault if that happens—I can't control these things.

Me: Why are you saying this?

You: I'm not trying to upset you. I'm just being honest.

You: Why are you quiet?

Me: I don't know what to say.

You: You look disappointed. Are you trying to make me feel bad?

Me: What? No!

You: I didn't say I don't want to marry you, just that if you want to marry me, you should do it for practical reasons.

Me: Practical reasons?

You: Yes, practical reasons. If you were approaching this practically, you'd be thinking: *If I marry her, I'll be eligible for her company's spousal benefits, and on top of that, I'll have someone to help me pay my mortgage. I'll also pay fewer taxes.* If you want to marry me for practical reasons, I think I'd be okay with that.

Me: Okay.

[2.](#) The Ecuménico Kun Iam is a "gift" given by the Portuguese before they left Macau. The statue is a fusion of the Notre Dame of Fatima and the Guanyin (female Buddha). It stands sixty metres high on a little island, facing the city, glowing at night.

[3.](#) Blue Girl is brewed in Hong Kong but was founded by brewers from Bremen, Germany. Blue Girl commercials always feature a group of German men doing an outdoor sport and dropping their case of Blue Girl beer. At the end of the commercial, a beautiful woman with blue eyes will show up with the case of beer, toss a beer to each of the men, and drink with them.

[4.](#) In old Hollywood movies, these are referred to as "oriental suits."

[5.](#) Three parts coffee and seven parts Hong Kong-style milk tea. The precise origin of this beverage is unclear. It's not too healthy but I like it a lot.

I Am a Cucumber Sandwich

1

You invite me to visit your home in Tokyo. It is a Saturday in June. I am walking around Shinjuku Park while you get a haircut. The rain has just stopped and the sky is bright. The birds are singing. The ground is starting to dry. I see sunlight reflected in puddles, and droplets dripping from the tips of leaves.

I arrive at the gazebo where we have arranged to meet at two. I am a little hungry.

“Look! My hair is short!” You spin around. “It’s so short and so light. Do you like it?”

Where did you come from? For a moment, I am confused. You just appeared in front of me, spinning around.

“Yeah, you look chic,” I finally manage to say. Your long dark hair is now chin-length.

“I like it! I feel so fresh.” You are wearing a simple white dress. You put your arms around my waist and your cheek on my chest. Your eyes are looking up at me. “Do you think I look boyish? Like a Korean boyband member?” You sit down on the park bench. From your Céline handbag, you pull out a phone and look at yourself. “I think I’m cool with looking like a BTS member,” you say to yourself. You take out a plastic bag from a convenience store. “I got some beer.” You take out two tall cans of Suntory Premium Malt. The beer cans are gold with blue labels.

“What else is in your bag?” I ask.

You take out a small makeup pouch, a copy of Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs*, *Purity* by Jonathan Franzen, a pair of headphones, and cucumber sandwiches.

I pick up your copy of *Purity*. "This doesn't seem like the kind of book you'd normally read," I say.

"It's awful," you say. "A guy who used to be in my creative writing class gave it to me, saying that I remind him of the main character. Isn't that gross?"

I nod.

"I don't think I'll be talking to him ever again. What kind of douche gives people books like this? It's misogynistic, and everything he writes is about white people. But you know what? I was reading this at the salon while my hair was falling on the page and I realized that if I thought he was dead, I'd probably be able to finish reading it."

"Why's that?"

You take a swig of beer. A bird flies by. A young man places a beer can in the recycling bin. Instead of answering my question, you ask, "Is there anyone you'd be comfortable reading if you knew they were dead?"

"Ishiguro," I offer instinctively.

You laugh and hand me a cucumber sandwich. "I got them for you!"

I hold in my hands two palm-sized triangles. Thin slices of cucumber placed between two pieces of crustless, lightly buttered white bread. I look at you. Your back is always perfectly straight when you sit. You take a sip from your beer. Your legs are kicking back and forth. Your shiny red heels hang from the tips of your toes. "You have beautiful ears."

"I know," you say, looking at the cucumber sandwich in your palms. Then you ask,

"Is it storytime?"

“How’d you know?”

“I can tell when it’s storytime.”

“How?”

“You stare at me for a bit and you bite your bottom lip.”

“I do?”

“Why do you like telling me stories so much?”

“I don’t know. Something about you makes me want to tell you stories.”

“Is it because I look like a little boy?”

“You don’t look like a boy. Look at you—you’re drinking a big-ass can of beer.”

You take another sip. “Ah. Beer is good once in a while, especially in June. Are you going to eat the sandwiches?”

“I will.”

“Tell me the story.”

“It’s not so much a story. It’s a scene I read in a book.” I put down the sandwich.

“What’s the book?”

“It’s—”

“Wait! Don’t tell me; I want to hear the story first.”

“Okay. I don’t really remember the details, so some of this might be made up.”

“Okay.”

“The boy is walking with the girl he’s in love with. The girl is beautiful and the boy looks okay.”

“Like us?”

“I just look okay?” I ask.

“Yes,” you say with certainty. “But I like you.”

“Anyway, the boy wants to tell the girl how beautiful she is but is hesitant because he knows that the girl, beautiful as she is, has heard every single compliment possible. It’s about time for the girl to leave, so the boy, trying to seize the moment, blurts out, ‘I love your

ears.' The girl is confused. No one has ever said such a thing to her. She gives the boy a smile, thanks him, and heads home. The boy is embarrassed. Of all the things in the world he might have declared, he has told the girl that he loves her ears."

"That's funny." You take a bite from a cucumber sandwich.

"I thought that was for me."

"I'm just having a little bite. Go on with the story."

"The next time they meet, the boy tries to kiss the girl before they part, but his timing is off. He misses her mouth and kisses her ear as she turns her head. Even more embarrassed, the boy runs home without turning back."

You laugh and look up at me. You are holding my cucumber sandwich.

"The next time they meet, the boy is determined. He attempts to kiss her the moment they greet each other."

"Is she into it?" you ask.

"To his surprise, she is. The two go back to her apartment and they kiss and make love."

"How old are they?"

"I'm not sure. Old enough, I'm sure."

You take another small bite from my sandwich.

"After the lovemaking, the girl starts cooking duck."

"Duck?"

"Yes, one of her happiest memories in life is of a duck-themed day she had when she was a child."

"What?"

"Duck is her favourite animal. When she was a child, she and her mother spent a day going to parks, watching ducks in the pond, meeting Donald Duck in a theme park, and at night, making and eating duck for dinner. Being with this boy made her feel the way she felt on that duck-themed day when she was a child. So, after making love, she decides it is only appropriate to make duck."

"That's lovely. But isn't eating duck to end the day a little barbaric?"

"The boy says the same thing to the girl when she explains to him why she started making duck. But she ignores him and prepares for him the best duck he has had in a long while. And from that moment on, the taste of duck leaves in him the same emotional memory that the girl's mother left in her."

I put my arm around you. I give your ear a soft kiss.

"I like that story." You're holding a third of a sandwich. "Open up." You put it in my mouth. Now the taste of cucumber sandwich is to me the taste of duck to the boy and the girl.

2

We continue to stroll through the park. Everything is green. "I'm happy," you announce.

"Me too."

"You're like a cucumber sandwich."

"What?"

"Do you know why I like cucumber sandwiches?"

"Tell me."

"If there's just the right about of butter, and the cucumbers are sliced to just the right degree of thinness, and the bread is just soft enough, a cucumber sandwich can be quite sophisticated without being fancy. You're not quite there yet, but I think you have the potential of becoming a cucumber sandwich one day."

"I'm flattered."

"I don't want anything fancy or extravagant. If I wanted that, I'd just marry a rich guy. It's easy. I much prefer cucumber sandwiches. And you tell me stories. You're like a storytelling cucumber sandwich."

From Shinjuku, we take the subway to Omotesando. This is where you grew up. The roads are clean and the sun is setting. I see cats wandering around.

“You see that black cat?” A small black cat with yellow eyes is lying next to a vending machine. “It’s called Boss,” you say. “It’s been around since I was a child. I wonder how old it is.”

“Hi, Boss,” I say. Boss ignores me. Boss closes its eyes. We continue walking.

“Am I mean to you sometimes?” you ask.

“Sometimes.”

I sense there’s more you want to say. I remain silent. Another black cat disappears in the hollow of a tree. Leaves fall and the sky is turning pink.

“I think I’ll be nicer to you if I quit my job.”

“You think so?”

Instead of answering me, you ask, “The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Where’s the moon? It’s not even dark yet.”

“Do you know what that means?”

“What what means?”

“*The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?* Do you know what it means for a person to ask that?”

I shake my head.

“When I ask the question, I’m not actually asking you to confirm whether the moon is beautiful or not. In the Meiji Era, Natsume Sōseki translated the English phrase *I love you as the moon is beautiful, isn’t it?* He believed that feelings should be expressed indirectly rather than directly. And to him, that question—*the moon is beautiful, isn’t it?*—perfectly captured the state of affection known as love.”

For a second, I wonder if your occasional meanness is an indirect expression of love. Probably not.

For some reason, I start thinking of a meal I once had in Singapore. I was travelling with my family. My grandmother was with us. It was one of the last times she went on a trip. She lives in a home for the elderly now. In Singapore the moon was also very bright.

I announce that I too have an alternative way of saying *I love you.*

“What is it?”

“We’ll go to a restaurant in Singapore. Strictly speaking, it’s not a restaurant but someone’s home. It’s a little house run by a retired chef who specializes in Hakka cuisine. You have to reserve the table months in advance. Behind the house is a little farm and a pond, where they grow their vegetables and breed their fish. You pay in advance, and they’ll make whatever the freshest food is that day. And instead of a dining room, they’ll seat you in the bedrooms of the house. You’ll have the best fishbone soup you’ve ever had there, I guarantee. We’ll go there, and I’ll make sure you’re seated comfortably on the bed.”

“Mmm.”

“Does that spell *I love you?*”

“Nope. I’m hungry though.”

We go to an izakaya. The izakaya is an old house located in Nishiazabu. Leaves that hang from two large willow trees cover the top of the house.

“I read Natsume Sōseki’s *Kokoro* when I was nine or ten,” you say.

We are having avocado and chicken carpaccio⁶ and shredded potato salad. “Do you know what my first impression of his book

was?"

"What?"

"I immediately got the sense that the author was gay, but when I pointed that out to my teacher, she ignored me."

"Why was that?"

"I was thirteen and studying in a small private school in Tokyo. The school was quite conservative, so people didn't really pick up on these things. But I did!"

"How?" I sip my sake.

"I was watching an Almodóvar film with my mom the night before, and I sensed the same undertone in *Kokoro*. So I raised my hand and announced to my teacher that Sōseki, Japan's celebrated writer and first scholar of British literature, was gay."

"What was the book about?"

"It was about the transition from the Japanese Meiji society to the modern era, told through the relationship between a young man and an older man—his sensei. Years later, when I was studying in England, I came across articles by Western scholars who pointed out the homoerotic undertone present throughout Sōseki's novel. I knew I was right!"

5

"What's the antonym of *moon*?" you ask me. We are walking through the small streets in Nishiazabu. Tall trees shade us from the street lights.

"The what?"

"The antonym of *moon*."

This is a game played by Osamu Dazai's protagonist in *No Longer Human*. The purpose is to name the one thing in the world that is least like the moon.

"Hate," I answer, after thinking about it for a moment.

"Not bad."

"Thank you very much."

"Alright. What is the antonym of *hate*, then?"

"Buddha."

"And the antonym of Buddha?"

"Cheesecake."

"I think Buddhists can eat cheesecake," you say. "It has to be something with meat in it."

"But eating cheesecake is such a worldly pleasure," I answer. "I don't think the Buddha would be eating cheesecake."

"Hmm...you're quite good at this," you say.

"Let's go to the convenience store for a beer," I suggest. I don't really want a beer. I think I just want to watch you drink it. The way you drink beer is elegant, and walking while talking to you is enjoyable, so I don't want to return to the house just yet. There's a convenience store nearby. Whenever we're in a convenience store, you spend a couple of minutes staring at lifestyle magazines. You enjoy looking at grandmas who dress well, say that it makes you happy.

Japanese convenience stores are the best that convenience stores can be. Their food is fresh, delicate, not overpriced, and clean. You once told me that they inspect their food every day to make sure the quality is good. Outside, we sit on a bench next to the road. The street is quiet. I hear leaves rustle. You take a sip from the beer. We are sharing a small can this time.

Your eyes are closed when you sip. Your back is perfectly straight. "Do you have a duck-themed-day-like memory?" you ask.

I take moment to think. "When I was a kid, I really liked trains," I say. "My grandfather's favourite song to play on the banjo was 'Lemon Tree.' It became my grandmother's favourite as well. My grandparents used to live in a tong lau. The place was large. The kitchen had a balcony and from it I could see, between the

buildings, the MTR train tracks. I was seven, sitting on the balcony while my grandfather played 'Lemon Tree' on the banjo in the living room."

"That's a nice one." You put your cheek on my shoulder. "Where is your grandpa now?"

"My grandfather passed when I was eleven or twelve." I take a sip of the beer. "I remember attending his funeral. I was standing in front of his coffin in a changshan with a mandarin collar. I remember picking that suit out by myself."

"That's cute."

"I don't remember much about him, to be honest. I see his picture once in a while when I'm visiting my parents. All I remember is that he was handsome and played the banjo."

"Sounds like a cool man."

"I think he was. He lived in Burma. Because he spoke English, he worked as a translator for government officials. After the war, he became an architect. He also painted, rode a motorcycle, and smoked a pipe. In my grandmother's house, there is a painting of the Burmese emperor's palace." *I wonder how he would feel about me putting the little I know about him in a story.* I look around: the leaves on the willow trees are moving slowly and a lady on a bicycle rides by. I feel a warm breeze. I look at you. Your legs are crossed. You stare at the small alleyway facing us. *That's enough about Burma,* I decide. "One memory I have of him is at church. He was wearing a plaid grey suit, brown oxford shoes, and dark socks. Of course, back then I didn't know the names of the things he was wearing. But the image in my mind is clear. Anyway, I remember watching him. His legs were crossed. The image has stuck with me till this day."

"I can tell," you say.

I am wearing navy-blue pants and oxfords. I give a little chuckle. We sit staring at the little alley that leads to your house. Boss

appears from the bushes and walks past us but doesn't make eye contact with us.

"What's your duck-themed-day-like memory?" I ask.

"Mine's about a pig," you say. "When I was a child, I would take my time on my way to school. I was distracted by everything I saw. I would stare at ants, leaves, flowers... Once, when I was strolling through my neighbourhood, I came across a man walking a pig."

"What?"

"Yes, a pig. Right over there." You point to the little alleyway. "The pig was pink. The man was walking it on a leash. The pig was the size of a dog. It was funny. I still remember that it had a curly tail—exactly three curls. It looked confused, the pig."

I laugh and take a sip of the beer. I wonder if, when I sip beer, I look as elegant as you do. Probably not. I'm a cucumber sandwich, and cucumber sandwiches aren't necessarily elegant. They might be sophisticated, but being elegant is different. The two aren't exactly synonymous.

"I am not making up these details," you continue. "There are some people in this world who spend their evenings walking a pig. The man walking the pig wore a green Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and a grass hat."

"I wonder what made him feel like he needed to walk his pig."

"I was startled. I had so many questions running through my head. Imagine me, a twelve-year-old girl—in a uniform, a yellow hat, and a red backpack—staring at a man walking a pig."

"What would you ask him?"

"Mr. Pig Walker, it is a pleasure to meet you, I would say. Since when did you start walking your pig in the morning? What is the name of your pig? Why mornings? Do you have breakfast before you walk your pig? Have you ever considered eating your pig?"

"Would you ever own a pig?"

"I don't think so. I think knowing that there are people in the world who spend their mornings walking a pig is good enough. I still think about it once in a while. It cheers me up when I'm at work. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because to me, Mr. Pig Walker is the antonym of *corporation*."

6

Knowing that there are people in the world who walk pigs in the morning is comforting.

Occasionally, when I am alone, I think about the man who walks his pig in the mornings. I imagine the twelve-year-old you, staring at it, confused. You are late for school, but you can't help but stare at this man walking his pig.

You: Oh my God! Look at that! (*Pointing to a little shop in the middle of the platform.*)

Me: What is it?

You: It's *the* noodle shop.

Me: What?

You: Some of the best kishimen is served on bullet-train platforms, so travellers can remember how good the food is and come back.

We enter the tiny shop. The bar is lined with standing customers. Last night, I took a shower while sitting down, and now I am to have noodles standing. Since we do not have that much time, we decide to share one order. In less than a minute, the chef hands us our food. It is served chilled, the perfect food for a hot summer morning. I start slurping the noodles and forget I am standing.

You turn your head to me.

You: Yum!

We proceed to the platform and board the train. Because we did not reserve our tickets ahead of time, we are seated separately. You are in front of me, wearing a dress I bought for you last summer. "It's rare to hear a man say he enjoys shopping for dresses," you once said. It is a sleeveless open-back summer dress from Club Monaco that ties at the neck.

[6.](#) I too was surprised when this dish arrived. That was the first time I had heard of it. But even now, as I write this, I find myself craving that cold delicious appetizer. I went to look up the dish that night to find out whether chicken can be eaten raw. Turns out chicken, as with most animal proteins, can be—it simply comes down to how the meat is handled. All you have to do to make raw chicken edible is put the chicken breast in the freezer for ten to twenty minutes to freeze its surface, boil it for two seconds, and chill it immediately by placing it in a bowl of ice water. Though the avocado chicken carpaccio was delicious, I never tried making it myself. I am the kind of person who cooks, and would occasionally try making new dishes, but for some reason, I never had the confidence. Ever since then, whenever I visit Tokyo, I go to that izakaya to have avocado chicken carpaccio.

Snow in June

1

I still wonder if telling you the story "Snow in June" when we returned to Toronto was the right thing to do. I told you this story, and then you quit your job. I don't know where you are right now. But whatever. Maybe debating whether something was the *right thing* is not the right way to go about this situation at all. I told you a story, and afterwards you quit your job and went somewhere, and I haven't heard from you since. The three events have no correlation. Maybe, as in the story itself, there is no right and wrong. Most of the time, all there is is coincidence.

2

It is summer. We are sitting on the balcony of our condo. Sometimes we sit here and drink wine after dinner.

"It's a little too warm tonight, don't you think?" You sip your wine.

"What do you mean?" I check my weather app. "It's twenty degrees."

"I swear it's a lot warmer now than it was this afternoon." You light a cigarette. You always have a smoke after dinner. You never smoke more than one cigarette a day.

"Huh," I say, not knowing how to respond.

"I bet it's going to be cold tomorrow morning." You take a drag from your Virginia Slim.

"What do you mean?"

"I promise you the weather will be cold tomorrow morning," you repeat. "Which part of that sentence do you not understand?" You take another drag. You look at me, elegantly exhaling a thin stream of smoke from your lips. I always want to kiss you when you do that. I'm not sure why.

"I mean...why? What makes you think it'll be cold tomorrow?"

"Because it's warm right now," you say, almost annoyed. "The temperature during the day is always different than that of the previous night, so it'll be cold tomorrow." You turn away from me and put out your cigarette.

I reach for my phone to check my weather app.

"I'm going to take a shower now," you say.

I am left alone on the balcony. I give up on checking tomorrow's weather. Our balcony overlooks the Gardiner Expressway and Billy Bishop Airport. I hear a plane but do not see one.

3

You are right. The next morning is cold and rainy. I feel even more stupid. You're at work. I work from home. I'm taking a break at a local coffee shop.

"What's up, man!" The barista wears an oversized shirt and a thick beard.

"Hey," I reply. I always find "What's up?" to be an odd question for a barista to ask a customer. "May I have a double Americano, please."

"Yes, sir!" He smiles. He doesn't seem to mind that I answered his "What's up?" with a simple "Hey." Maybe "Hey" is actually the correct answer to the question "What's up?"

"Do you think it's going to be cold again tomorrow morning?" I ask.

"Of course," you say. You take a drag from your Virginia Slim, but this time you turn away before exhaling.

I do not get to experience the pleasure of wanting to kiss you.

"A story, please!" you say.

It is night. We are out on the balcony again. It is warm. I check my phone. It's twenty degrees. June. I recall a story that was told to me when I was a child. "You want a story?"

"Please."

"I have a rather interesting one. It's kind of strange though."

"Okay."

"It's a little depressing too."

"I want to hear it."

4

There once lived a beautiful young woman. She lived with her father. Her father decided to go to the capital so he could take the imperial examination. Those who achieved a high score on the imperial examination would become important officials for the Emperor. She was to stay in the village. Upon his departure, she was soon married off to a neighbour.

Years later, the young woman's husband also decided to leave for the capital so he could take the imperial exam and seek his fortune. After the beautiful young woman's husband departed for the capital, she was left at home with only her husband's mother and a servant. The beautiful woman and her mother-in-law got along well.

The husband was accompanied on his travels to the capital by a man known as Donkey Zhāng, the son of the family servant. Donkey desired the beautiful young woman. On their way to the capital, Donkey pushed the husband into a river. The husband drowned. Donkey returned home, claiming the husband had lost his footing and fallen to his own death.

The husband's mother was overwhelmed and took sick. One day, she requested a warm bowl of mutton-tripe soup. Donkey poisoned the soup. The soup didn't smell right to the mother. She set the soup aside. Donkey's mother found the soup. She drank it and died. Donkey decided to use his mother's death to his advantage. He accused the young woman and her mother-in-law of poisoning his mother to death. He threatened to turn both of them over to the authorities if the young woman did not agree to marry him. The young woman refused, so Donkey hauled the two women to court and bribed the magistrate to find them guilty. The young woman and her mother-in-law were tortured.

Unable to stand watching her mother-in-law be tortured, the young woman falsely confessed. She was to be beheaded. As the time drew nigh for her execution, she declared her innocence to the jailors and told them her innocence would be demonstrated by three miracles:

1. When she was beheaded, her blood would not spill all over the ground but would fall only onto a small square piece of cloth, which she would place before her.
2. Though her execution would take place on a warm June afternoon, snow would fall and cover her body like a blanket.
3. Her death would be followed by three years of drought.

All three of the miracles came to pass.

Years after that, on the first day of June, the beautiful woman's father returned to the village as an important official. Suddenly it started to snow, and his daughter's ghost appeared in front of him. The daughter told the father everything that had happened to her.

"What did her father do?" You sip your wine.

"He demanded that the court reopen the case of his daughter. Both Donkey and the corrupt magistrate who had sentenced the daughter to death were put on trial, and both of them were beheaded."

"That's the end?"

"Yup."

"That's such a strange story." You smile.

"I know, right?"

"I like it!" you say. "It says a lot about capitalism. It's really relevant!" You take a drag of your Virginia Slim, exhale. You smile again.

"How is the story about capitalism?" I ask. Sometimes when you say obscure things, I wonder if you're just trying to make me feel stupid.

"I'm quitting my job tomorrow!" you reply.

"What? Where did that come from?" I know you're not joking.

"Where did what come from?" you repeat.

"You quitting your job tomorrow."

"I am."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, because I'm quitting my job tomorrow."

"But why?"

"Maybe you should quit your job tomorrow as well! Will you?"

"No," I say.

"Why not?"

"I like my job." I decide to have a cigarette too. I know I'll probably never understand why you're planning to quit your job and decide to change the topic. "Can you tell me what that story has to do with capitalism?" I ask.

"Don't you think we're a self-centred generation of people?" you answer.

"What?"

"What do you not understand now? Come on. Can you ask better questions, please? Words like *what* and *why* aren't proper questions." You stand up and lean against the rail of the balcony.

"More of a question than 'What's up?'" I mumble.

Seated next to you, I feel short. A small plane takes off from Billy Bishop. You wonder where it's going.

I stand up to lean against the rail. The sky is almost dark and the plane disappears in the distance. For some reason, I have the odd sensation I am waiting for something.

"What we do doesn't matter much at all. Isn't that great?" you ask.

"I'm sorry?"

"The father made the choice to go to the capital to become an official, leaving his daughter behind. One can argue that if he didn't leave, nothing bad would have happened. But who knows? It might have. Maybe the daughter would have ended up marrying the neighbour anyway, and maybe Donkey would still have killed the husband out of jealousy. Who knows? But the fact that he left and returned as an important official gave him the power to punish the corrupt official and Donkey. Everything came full circle. Everything that happened was neither the fault of the father nor that of the husband. The story has no didactic meaning or centre. It is not a moral lesson. In the world of this story, where we and the choices we make don't matter much, who or what do you think is at fault?"

"I'm not sure."

"Desire! Donkey killed the husband and used his mother's death to his advantage in an attempt to get what he wanted—the daughter. Likewise, the husband and the father both left the beautiful woman behind to get what they wanted—power and status. See how all of this relates to how people act in the world of capitalism?"

"Wouldn't that be the central meaning of the story then?" I ask.
"You said the story wasn't didactic, but judging from what you just said, wouldn't the moral of the story be 'Do not submit to desire'?"

"No!" you say. "How is that the moral of the story? There's not always a moral or a central meaning. Sometimes shit just happens. Like I said, everything went full circle. The father was able to punish Donkey in the end because he'd desired to become a powerful official. The story tells us that the presence of 'desire' will always be there, but it doesn't tell us to do anything about it. Sometimes there's no right and wrong. Shit happens or it doesn't, and we should just be happy when bad shit doesn't happen."

"I think you're absolutely right."

"Of course I am."

An airplane lands at Billy Bishop Airport. I look at you as you wonder where the plane came from. It is dark now, but the night is still warm. I try to imagine the fast cars on the highway to be shooting stars, but I can't. They're too loud.

"Why do people like driving loud cars?" I ask.

"Because they think they're important. And because they have small dicks," you say, without looking at me.

We wake up. It is now the last day of June. You kiss me goodbye and leave the house to quit your job. It is my final semester of graduate school. I have completed all the required courses and no longer have to go to class. My job is to sit at home and do translation work. I translate Chinese documents into English for Chinese companies looking to work with Canadian ones. You make a little more money than I do. You don't seem to mind, and I don't

either. After you leave, I do the dishes, take out the trash, and go for a jog by the lake. Again, the weather is colder than it was last night.

You were born in Tokyo and came to Canada for university. In university, you studied comparative literature and art history. You always dreamed of working in the arts, but for some reason, the idea seemed farfetched to you. Your grades were outstanding, but instead of going into a master's program, you accepted an invitation to interview for a marketing position at a company. I am writing this because a part of me always wanted you to quit your job, I realize. You had told me that a guest speaker who visited the business course you took as an elective found you talented. The guest speaker, who is also your boss, is a straight woman. You made a point of making this clear to me, so I wouldn't imagine the job offer as a cliché case of a creepy rich man trying to seduce a young university student.

7

We decide to go for a walk. We walk from our apartment building toward the noisy shooting stars.

"What did your boss say when you quit?" I ask.

"She was fine with it. She wished me luck."

"Don't you usually have to give a month's notice?"

"Yeah, but she's understanding like that. She said there's no point in keeping me for a month if I've already decided to leave."

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her it's time for me to leave, and she said she thinks so as well."

"What?"

"Stop being so surprised. You're always overreacting. It's not that strange—some people are understanding like that, you know?"

"So what are you going to do now?" I ask.

"I'm going to stop smoking from now on," you announce.

I don't doubt that you'll stop smoking. Actually, I'm pretty sure you will. However, I'm not sure how long your not smoking is going to last. Whenever you decide to do something, you do it—which is also the reason I'm not sure how long your not smoking is going to last. One day, most likely out of nowhere, you might say to me, "I'm going to start smoking again. Smoking doesn't harm other people as long as I do it alone on the balcony. If I want to have a smoke, what reasons are there not to?" In a situation like that, I would have no answer for you.

We walk under the Gardiner Expressway to the Toronto Music Garden. We sit on a bench. We watch planes land at Billy Bishop Airport. Again, I have the strange sense that I am waiting for something.

"Want to go grab some cocktails?" you say. "They're on me!"

It is a Friday; we drink till it's late.

I come to the conclusion that everything is an endless paradox. You work for a company that is based in Japan. The company brands itself as a multicultural, diverse corporation—one that values gender and racial equality. It's one of the first in Japan to do so. But according to you, the CEO himself doesn't seem to know much about sexual or cultural minorities when asked. To him, the branding of the company might be more for the purpose of marketing than for human rights. However, one cannot deny the fact that, within the company, people are treated more equally than they are in most Japanese companies. I call that a paradox. Business people call that a win-win.

I wake up the next morning and you are not next to me. You don't leave a note, nor do you answer the phone. I walk out onto the balcony. It's a little chilly. I don't know where you went or when you're coming back. Maybe you'll be gone for a while.

It's a Saturday morning; the highway is empty. I'm standing on the balcony. No planes are landing. The weather is cold, but it's sunny. *Maybe you're off to take the imperial examination.* I call you again—no answer. I check my weather app. It's twelve degrees. I put on a sweater, make some coffee.

Grocery Shopping in the Desert

1

We are naked. I feel you touching my back with the tip of your finger.

Imagine a very clean pane of glass. You know the glass is there, but you can't resist the temptation to use the tip of your finger to touch it—just to make sure. The slightest touch. You touch my back like that. I feel transparent.

Later that day, I will come to the realization that the things I do may have little bearing on events that follow. Most of the time, all there is is chance.

"I had a strange dream," you say when we awaken.

"Tell me about it."

"There's this story I really liked when I was a child. It's about a professor. He was brilliant, but socially he was a bit awkward. Students and colleagues respected him, but none of them were what you would really call 'friends.' The story is actually quite simple. I'm not entirely sure it even counts as a story."

"Tell me."

"Well, the story consists of one main event: the professor's death. Before I tell you about the event of his death, I must let you know that every word of this is true. This event actually happened."

"Alright."

"A pig, a live pig, fell out of a plane. And the professor, who was walking alone on the street, was hit by the falling pig and died."

“What?”

“Yes, a pig dropped out of an airplane and hit the brilliant professor on the head. Both the pig and the professor died right on the spot.”

“Okay...”

“People couldn’t help but laugh whenever the professor’s wife spoke of his death. She felt as if all the respect her husband had gained as an academic, all of his dignity, was lost because of his sudden, absurd death.”

“That’s a little sad.”

“That’s the end.”

“Wow. And this story was told to you in class?”

“No, I read it in some bookstore when I was in elementary school.”⁷

“So, what was your dream about?”

“Oh, right. In my dream, I was the pig.”

“What?”

“I was the pig, flying out of the plane. I’d never imagined the story from the point of view of the pig before. It’s actually quite scary. Imagine dropping from a plane and landing on the face of some middle-aged guy. Kind of scary, don’t you think? See? My back is still sweating.”

I touch your back with the tip of my fingers. I wonder if I’m making you feel transparent.

You get out of bed. You are naked. You put a blanket around your shoulders and go to the kitchen to make coffee. “I like it when you wear white shirts,” you say to me a few minutes later. You are drinking coffee on our red couch.

I never put my shirts in the dryer. I hang wet shirts on the laundry rack. The rack is full. You get up, take the last white dress shirt from my hands. You place it on the back of an old wooden chair

in the middle of the room and take a picture of the wrinkly shirt resting there.

2

"You're kind of weird about words, aren't you?" you ask. We are now having brunch at a bistro. It is June. You wear a clean white sweater dress that shows your shoulders and a silver silk scarf around your neck. Under the sun, your shoulders are smooth and shiny. *I wonder if your back is still sweating.*

"What makes you say that?" I reply.

"I don't know. There's something about the way you speak."

I don't know how to respond. The conversation dies. Your attention drifts to the extra-spicy Caesar in front of you. You finish the entire glass. Bob Dylan's "Down the Highway" is playing on the stereo. It is a sunny Wednesday afternoon in June. I forget why it is we don't have to work today. I see a pigeon landing on a branch. It makes a noise. Time flows in a very strange way on random days off in the middle of the week. I sip my mimosa. Dylan strums his guitar several times and then the song ends abruptly.

"That's a strange ending to a song," you say.

"I guess."

"It doesn't feel like a proper ending."

"Why?"

"Well, he just strummed his guitar a bunch of times and stopped singing."

"Maybe that's on purpose—to give you the sense that he's still walking on the highway."

"And where the heck is he going?"

"What?"

"Bob Dylan, what is he singing about? Why is he walking on a highway? Where the fuck is he walking toward?"

I want to say, "The Statue of Liberty," or "Wherever 'his girl' is," but I know this is not the answer you are looking for. Whenever you ask questions with obvious answers, you are looking for an interesting answer. If I simply say, "New York, where 'his girl' is," you will probably respond with a simple "Duh" and find me uninteresting. The sun is bright. Wellington Street is quiet. From the patio where we are sitting, we can see the CN Tower.

"I think he's walking to a desert," I say. The sunny Wednesday afternoon makes me feel like saying the word *desert*.

"A desert?"

"Yeah, a desert."

"He says he's walking on a highway though."

I don't know how to explain why I said desert.

"What's in the desert?" you ask. You are interested in my answer.

"A highway," I answer.

"You're stupid," you murmur, now uninterested. "Let's go to T&T to get some groceries. I feel like cooking tonight."

3

"Going to the Asian supermarket, yeah?" the Uber driver asks.

"Yeah," I answer.

"That place is great!" the driver continues. "I get rice from there all the time. I like the egg tarts they have too."

"Yeah, they're delicious!" you say.

"Where are you guys from?"

"I'm Chinese," I answer.

"I'm Japanese."

"*Nǐ hǎo*," says the driver.

"*Nǐ hǎo*," you reply for me.

Cherry Street, the only street that leads to T&T, is for some reason blocked. The driver drops us off under the Gardiner Expressway, and from here, we walk. And walk. And walk. I am wearing a linen T-shirt, a blazer, and loafers. You are in your white sweater dress and heels. The street is empty. The Bob Dylan song is still stuck in my head. I imagine that the song is about us walking to a supermarket.

4

"I have a story for you," I say as we walk.

"Okay."

"In a remote part of Japan lived a man, his wife, and their beautiful little girl. One day, the man was called away on business in distant Kyoto. He returned with gifts. He opened a bamboo basket and took out a wonderful doll and a box of cakes, and he put them into his daughter's hands. Then he presented his wife with a metal mirror. It was shiny, and on the back of the mirror was a painting of pine trees. The man's wife had never seen a mirror before, and upon gazing into it, she felt as if another woman was gazing back at her. Her husband explained to her that it was merely a reflection of herself. The man bade his wife to take great care of the mirror."

"Why do you like these Eastern folktales so much?" you ask.

"They're fun, unpredictable."

"Alright, go on."

"The wife became very ill. Just before she died, she called to her little daughter and said, 'Dear child, when I am dead, take care of your father. When you feel most lonely, look into this mirror and you will see me looking back.' The man married again, and his new wife was not at all kind to her stepdaughter. But the little one, remembering her mother's words, retired to the corner of her room and eagerly looked into the mirror to seek comfort. When the daughter looked into the mirror, she did not see her mother's face

drawn in an expression of pain, as it had been when the mother had been on her deathbed; instead, the face she saw was young and beautiful."

"That's a little creepy."

"One day, the child's stepmother saw the girl crouching in a corner over an object and murmuring to herself. This woman, who detested the child, believed that her stepdaughter detested her in return. The stepmother went to her husband and told him that his wicked child was doing her best to kill her through means of witchcraft."

"Let's cross here." We cross the road and enter the T&T parking lot.

"The father went straight to his daughter's room. The girl saw him and slipped the mirror into her sleeve. Her father grew angry. 'What the fuck is in your sleeve?' asked her father."

"You swear too much."

"Anyway, the daughter answered him: 'The mirror you gave Mother, and which she gave me. Every time I look into its shining surface, I see the face of Mother. She is young and beautiful. When my heart aches, I take out the mirror. Mother's face, with its sweet, kind smile, brings me peace. It helps me to bear the harsh words of Stepmother.' The man understood, and he loved his child even more for her familial piety. Even the girl's stepmother, after learning about the mirror, felt ashamed. She asked for the daughter's forgiveness. And this child, who believed she had seen her mother's face in the mirror, forgave her stepmother. However, the stepmother was still troubled by the accusation she had made against her own stepdaughter. So she departed from the home forever. And the father and lovely daughter lived happily ever after."

"Interesting story. It's just like the pig one I told you this morning!"

"Is it?"

"Of course it is! The pig story tells us how unimportant the things we do are. The professor's research gained him the respect of his peers, but because of his comical and utterly ridiculous death, no one ever thought about his work when they talked about him after he died. All they talked about was how he was killed by a flying pig."

"So, are you saying that his life and his research became unimportant?"

"What? No! I never said that. It is always important and meaningful to do good things—things you are passionate about. You just shouldn't expect what you do to matter that much. The daughter in the mirror story never expected that her use of the mirror would have such a profound impact on her father and her stepmother. All she thought was that she was staring at a younger version of her late mother. In the pig story—"

"Sorry." I interrupt to grab us a shopping basket. "Continue."

"The daughter never intended for what she was doing to matter much; she was just staring in the mirror because it made her feel better. Plus, she wasn't even staring at her mother. She was just staring at herself. The fact that the father and stepmother were both so profoundly moved by what she was doing is completely absurd, don't you think?"

"I guess."

"Just as absurd as a flying pig killing a respected intellectual," you say. "Maybe there's little relation between the things we do and the events that come afterward."

"I have a story for you," you say. We are waiting in the checkout line. "This one is also about a kid and her father."

"Okay."

"A kid tells her father that, lately, whenever she returns to her classroom after lunch, there is a piece of shit on the floor."

"Ew."

"Yup, a poop—in the same spot, every day after lunch."

"Yes, I get it."

"So the child asks the father why there is a poop on the floor every day. And the father says that the only explanation is that someone takes a shit there whenever everyone else is at lunch. The daughter cannot believe that anyone would do such a thing. So the father says that maybe someone takes the shit from the washroom, brings it to the classroom, and places it in the exact same spot every afternoon. The daughter, finding that to be extremely disgusting as well, still refuses to believe that anyone would ever do such a thing. Wait. Here, I'll pay for the vegetables and you pay for the noodles, okay?"

"Sure. Go on with the story."

"So, the father gives up," you continue. "Alright," he says. 'The shit just *is*. It just *is* and will always be there without reason.' The daughter is satisfied with his answer and goes to bed."

"That's um...that's really interesting."

"That was a good story, wasn't it?"

We exit the supermarket holding shopping bags filled with soba noodles and vegetables. The supermarket is located in the Lower Don Lands—a port separated from the rest of downtown Toronto. The port is filled with cargo—various goods that arrive from overseas. From the T&T parking lot, I look back at the rest of downtown. I feel like I'm outside the country. For some reason, I feel transparent again. Maybe something from overseas is stroking my back, to make sure I still exist. I wonder if you feel that.

"I'm going to make nice, cold soba noodles tonight!" You put your arm through mine. You start skipping. "Let's pick up some

white wine on the way back!"

The sky is bright. Cherry Street is still empty. As we re-enter the country in our semi-formal attire, I imagine myself walking through a desert with bags of groceries in my hand.

7. I thought a story like this would be easy to find. So far, however, I am still unable to find the original text. Maybe it doesn't exist.

You Are Eating an Orange. You Are Naked

Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself.—Judith Butler, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*.

You just started a new job as a writer and photographer for an independent cultural magazine. We are back in Toronto. It is a Sunday in July and we spend the day eating, talking, taking baths, and smoking weed. This is the night you decide to visit Taiwan.

1

We are sitting on the patio of a café a few steps from our apartment building.

“What the fuck?” You put down your book. “What is the point of having such a loud car?” You look at me, expecting an answer.

“Loud engines make the car accelerate faster.”

“What is the point of that? Look! He’s stuck at a red light now.”

“Some people really like the two seconds of going really fast.”

“If that’s true, then we’d see people yelling and sprinting on the street.”

“Maybe they think it’s attractive.”

“I think if you’re a sensible human being, you would never drive an obnoxiously loud car with only two seats. It’s selfish. Unless there is something attractive or sexy about being selfish. Is there?”

The loud car is nowhere to be seen, but we can still hear it.

The café we are at also sells weed. After you order your coffee, you walk up to the barista, give him a little chin-up nod, and follow him to the backroom to buy some weed before sitting down to read your book.

You manage to finish half of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* over the course of a large coffee. I, on the other hand, over the course of drinking my coffee, manage to reply to an email regarding my tax return.

"Strip," you whisper. You are sitting next to me. You are wearing a silk wrap dress with a detailed flower pattern. I find out later that you're wearing nothing underneath. "Strip," you whisper again. This time even quieter.

I don't know how to react. I look over at you.

"Let's just head home. Reading this makes me want to have sex." You don't look at me when you say that. You simply stand up and leave, expecting me to follow.

2

On the brink of sleep, I decide that Sunday afternoon is by far the best time to have sex. When we wake up, I look out the window and see the weather is the same as it was this morning. It is three, but it feels like a different day. You ask if I want to take a bath with you, so I fix one. Our bathtub isn't especially large. We barely fit in it together.

"Why'd you whisper 'strip' to me at the café?" Steam is rising from the water. Your eyes are closed.

"I was curious," you say.

"Why?"

"In the book I was reading, the main guy, Tomas, would utter the word *strip!* and the women he was seducing would listen."

"They would just strip for him on demand?"

"Yeah." Your eyes are still closed. As you rest your head on the edge of the bathtub, I imagine you picturing scenes in the book.

"You know about Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return?" you ask.

"Kind of."

"Nietzsche believes that all things in existence recur over and over for all eternity."

"Yeah."

"Existence is inherently weighty because it is stationed in an infinite cycle. So everything that occurs takes on an eternally fixed meaning. And when we are born, we are born into a world that is filled with perpetual meanings we need to live by. As Milan Kundera puts it, like Jesus Christ nailed to a cross, we are, likewise, nailed to eternity."

"Do you think people naturally want the power to change and shift the meaning of things? I mean, Jesus never tried to change his fate."

"Right. In Kundera's book, the concept is inverted. Wait. Hold on. Let me go get it." You leave the tub and, without drying yourself off, run to get the book, leaving the floor wet.

"Alright, here we go." You get back in the tub. "If life does not return, then it means it is without weight. So, what I'm trying to tell you is, it doesn't matter whether life is beautiful, shitty, or sublime. You see? Without weight, each life is insignificant and no decision matters. And that is a relief." You toss the book on the toilet seat and look at me. "If one does not consider the eternal return to be true, then every decision we make will be under the premise that we, as individuals, are not important. That is, when we die, we leave nothing behind. We don't matter. And that is unbearable. So one of

the main questions the book is asking is, which should we choose? To live life dutifully and heavily, or freely and lightly?"

"I don't know. All of that sounds so self-centred. I think I'm not that important, and I don't think that's unbearable. That's just how life is. But anyway, tell me more. How does the whole 'strip' thing tie into this?"

"Living lightly bears the burden of constantly reminding the self that it doesn't matter, and the constant thought of self-insignificance becomes a burden of its own. So the characters in the book are trying to find some kind of balance between lightness and weight. And here's when the stripping comes in."

"Finally."

"Because every sexual encounter of Tomas, who is married, is 'light' and without emotional attachment. The women he has sex with also tend to be 'light.' Over the course of every sexual encounter, there is an overwhelming amount of lightness, so the women seek a sense of weightiness to balance the situation. Thus, they develop a longing to be tied down." You pick up the book from the toilet seat. The book is now wet. "The women in the book are intoxicated, they see the beauty in submitting completely, want to be told what to do. That is why they take off their clothes when he simply utters the word *strip*. Isn't that funny?"

"Funny?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

You ignore my question. You lean back and close your eyes.

The water is getting cold. You say you are too lazy to move. You run more hot water in the tub and turn your back toward me.

"Shoulder massage, please."

As I massage your shoulders, I feel like I am also, in a way, intoxicated by the beauty of submitting completely to your

commands. Hot water fills the tub once more. Your hair is wet and beautifully dark. You reach for the book and, from between the pages, you take out a joint. You light it.

“When did you roll that?” I ask. Instead of answering me, you pass me the joint. I take a drag.

Some time passes. Out of nowhere, you stand up, take the towel to dry yourself off, and leave the bathroom without saying a word. I am left alone in the bathtub.

3

I find you sitting on the red couch in the living room with your legs crossed. You are eating an orange. You are naked. Above your head hangs a black-and-white photograph of Ai Weiwei giving the Hong Kong harbour’s financial district the middle finger.⁸ I take out the Polaroid camera and take a photo of you. In the photograph, you are naked, a piece of orange is sticking out of your mouth, and you are giving me the middle finger. You like the picture. A week later, you slip it into my wallet without me noticing. I will carry it around from then on.

4

“I want Chinese food,” you say. We are on the balcony. You are trying to dry off your copy of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in the sun.

“Sure.”

You leave the book on the balcony.

We don’t usually come here for dinner. The restaurant is famous for its dim sum, and dim sum is food for the daytime.

"For two?" asks a man with a moustache.

"Yes."

"Over here."

We sit down.

"Tea?" he asks

"Water," I answer.

"Other drinks?"

"Not right now."

The man walks away.

At night, the menu is slightly different. You decide to have soup and tofu. I decide to order a dish called Taiwanese Three Cup Chicken.⁹

"Water." The man returns with a white pot of hot water. "What would you like?"

"I'll have the pumpkin soup and the tofu pot, please," you say. I order my chicken.

"Anything else to drink." His tone is without a question mark. For some reason, that makes me feel I need to order something to drink.

"Want to share a Tsingtao?" you ask.¹⁰

"Sure."

"One Tsingtao," the man tells himself, and leaves.

"You know why I like Chinese restaurants?"

"Why?"

"They make me feel like I'm in a Wong Kar-wai film."¹¹ You close your eyes and start humming Nat King Cole's "Te Quiero Dijiste."¹² "If I had an extra ticket, would you come along?"¹³ you ask.

The man comes back with a Tsingtao and pours it into two thin glasses. You drink quickly and drain your glass before the food arrives.

“You want dessert.” Again, the man’s tone is without a question mark.

“Sure,” you answer.

“What do you want?” He does not give us a menu.

“Do you have any tong sui?” I ask him in Cantonese. I ask him this because I know you really like this one particular tong sui.

“No, we don’t make that here,” answers the man with a moustache. “Canadian people don’t eat that stuff. Order some mango pudding.”¹⁴

“Sure,” I answer.

“I want some good tong sui too,” the man continues. “There’s a small dessert place in Chinatown that has it, but it’s nothing like what I eat at home. The job of a Chinese restaurant in Toronto is to serve customers the *idea* of Chinese food rather than *actual* Chinese food.” He walks away to get us the pudding.

“What did he say?” you ask.

“The job of a Chinese restaurant in Toronto is just to serve customers the idea of Chinese food, to imitate it, rather than present what that really is.”

“The idea of Chinese food?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you agree?” you ask.

“I’m not sure.”

“I guess we can’t deny that what we ate was an idea of Chinese food—a Westerner’s idea of Chinese food, that is. Which is actually a little healthier—less greasy, don’t you think?”

“What difference exists between an idea and a metaphor?” you ask.

“Huh?”

“Metaphors are sexier than ideas,” you say, ignoring me.

“Bill.” The waiter places the bill on our table, cutting you off.

It is eight in the evening. The sky is still bright. We are full. From St. Clair Avenue, we decide to walk down Yonge Street to Bloor. Whenever I'm out with you, I notice people turning their heads to check you out. You don't seem to notice. Or maybe you're just used to it.

"Alright. Here's why metaphors are sexier than ideas. Are you ready for this?" you ask.

"Yup."

"Metaphors are sexy because they can give birth to love."

"How?"

"Tomas was what we might today call a 'player.' He was married once but left his family and felt great about it. He was also one of the top surgeons in Prague. He had met Tereza when he was visiting a small spa in a village. Tereza was working as a waitress at a restaurant Tomas visited before he returned to Prague."

"Hold on, I need to tie my shoelaces," I say, kneeling down.

You light a Virginia Slim. You exhale. "One stormy night," you continue, "Tereza, without any explanation, decided to go to Tomas's apartment in Prague. They had sex." You take another drag. "To Tomas, Tereza seemed like a child, a child someone had put in a basket daubed with pitch and sent downstream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed. Because Tereza seemed so vulnerable, the player let down his guard."

"Okay. Let's go." I get up.

"Tomas did not know that metaphors were that dangerous. So just like that, Tereza entered Tomas's poetic memory."

"What's that?"

"Love begins with a metaphor. Which is to say, love begins at the point when someone enters our poetic memory. Tereza entered Tomas's poetic memory in the form of a metaphor and gave birth to

love. So that's what makes metaphors sexier than ideas—they're dangerous."

"I guess loud cars that accelerate fast are also sexy because they're dangerous," I offer.

You put your arm through mine.

"Remember how we met?" I ask.

"Yeah. One day I woke up and you were sitting in a little basket next to my bed."

6

The time is nine. You say you don't want to go home yet because we spent the entire afternoon at home already. We decide to visit the small dessert house the waiter mentioned.

"I have a question," I say. "Is Tomas really in love with Tereza or is he just in love with the idea of playing protector in the metaphor he created for himself? I mean, he's a player, right? So he must be 'light.' And according to the whole Nietzschean thing, the role of a protector is a 'weighty' one. So, is he 'in love' with her just because he longs to be weighted down?"

"Let's not talk about that book anymore. I'm sick of it."

You are capable of losing interest in something in a matter of seconds.

"I think the book tries too hard to make sense of shit," you continue. "I don't think everything happens for a reason. Most of the time shit just happens by chance."

I agree. I decide to tell you a story.

7

"I have a story that doesn't try to understand what love is at all."

“Can we order first?”

“Sure.”

The Taiwanese dessert house is quite small. However, the menu is not. There are over seventy kinds of desserts to choose from. You had dùn nāi¹⁵ for the first time at a dessert house in Macau that served both Portuguese and Cantonese desserts. We order two.

“Once upon a time in the mountains lived White Snake and Black Snake. Both snakes had magical powers.”

“What kind of story is this?”

“Chinese folktale.”

“Alright, go on.”

“They wanted to visit West Lake for its beautiful scenery. White Snake metamorphosed into a very beautiful girl—Lady White. And Black Snake turned itself into a lovely maiden. While they stood on a bridge to admire the beauty of the lake, Lady White noticed a young man walking toward her from the other side of the bridge. Lady White immediately fell in love with the young man.”

“What?”

“It gets even weirder. To help her sister, Black used her powers to make the young man fall in love with White. The two got married. However, the Abbot of a remote Buddhist temple sensed that something was wrong and decided to expose White.”

“This is quite good,” you say.

“The dessert or the story?”

“Go on with the story.”

“White, Black, and the man moved to the city and opened an herbal medicine store. They were kind people/snakes. Patients who were unable to pay were given free medicine. The Abbot, however, still found the relationship between White and the man to be problematic. So, he approached the young man and warned him that

his wife was a snake. Did I mention that by the time this happened, White was already pregnant with the young man's child?"

"No."

"Well, she was. The Abbot told the man that if he gave White the Dragon Festival alcohol, her true self would be revealed."

"Wait, hold on. How young is this young man?"

"I have no idea. Anyways, the man did not believe the Abbot but figured there was nothing wrong with having a drink with his wife, so he brought home the festival alcohol to celebrate the festival with Lady White. White, after taking a sip, immediately fell ill."

"Are you sure that's not because she's pregnant?"

"Stop analyzing it. Anyway, the man went into the bedroom to check on Lady White, and in her place was a large white snake coiled on the bed. The man was so shocked that he fell to the floor and died."

"He died?"

"Yup, dead cold, on the floor, by the bed."

"That's not the end, right?"

"No. When the power of the alcohol had faded, White resumed her human form. She was heartbroken to find the man dead. But she knew of a Ganoderma that could restore him to life. She flew to the Kunlun Mountains to get it. But on her way back, she encountered the White Crane, who was responsible for looking after the Ganoderma. Just as the White Crane was about to kill her, a voice from the skies commanded the White Crane to stop. It was the voice of the Immortal Southern End."

"What's that?"

"It is a voice that comes from the skies. It has no form."

"Cool."

"Lady White begged the voice of the Immortal Southern End to help her. Impressed by her sincerity, the Immortal Southern End granted her the Ganoderma. The man was healed but, remembering

that his wife was a snake, he left and went to the temple where the Abbot resided, and requested a divorce. The Abbot felt that the man should now devote his life to the temple to atone for having had a relationship with a snake, and forced the man to become a monk."

"You can force people to become monks?"

"Yes. The Abbot trapped the man in the temple and shaved his head. Lady White, along with Black, went to the temple and begged the Abbot to let the man go. The Abbot refused. In anger, Lady White and Black gathered together a great army of underwater creatures to attack the monastery. The Abbot summoned soldiers from the heavens to defeat all of the underwater creatures."

"Want to share another one?" you ask.

"Are you that hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Alright. Go ahead and order one more."

"Go on with the story."

"Lady White, still pregnant with child, could not possibly fight. So, Lady White and Black fled to West Lake—where they had first met the man. Little did they know that while the Abbot was fighting Lady White and Black, the young man had been secretly released by a young monk who worked at the temple. And, by sheer chance, the man wandered back to West Lake. Black and White saw the young man walking across the same bridge. Black went for her sword."

"Why would she do that?"

"Because Black loved White and saw the man as the source of all of White's sufferings."

"Okay..."

"But Lady White held Black back and, instead, apologized to the man for lying. Now, with a full understanding of each other, the two were able to fall in love again—this time without the use of magic. They went back to their home and started a family. Lady White gave birth to a son and the four of them lived happily together."

“Is that the end?”

“Nope.”

“This story is kind of long.”

“Should I stop?”

“No! I don’t want to hear half a story. Try summarizing the rest.”

“Alright.”

“I’m going to eat this.”

“The Abbot, unhappy to see the family living together so happily, attacked again. He captured White and imprisoned her under the Thunder Peak Pagoda by West Lake. Black, however, was able to escape to the mountains, where she practised magic. Several years later, Black’s magic became strong enough to take revenge. Black summoned a giant crab, and the crab ate the Abbot. Lady White was reunited with her husband and her son. The family of four lived happily ever after.”

“Interesting! I have no idea who the hero is.” You pause for a bit.

“But I guess that’s okay.”

“Did you like it?”

“I finished all of it!” You show me the empty bowl.

We leave the dessert house and start walking home. It is ten-thirty.

“If I hear a loud car on the way home, I’m going to slap you.”

“What?”

“Each time I hear another car with a roaring engine, I’ll slap you in the face.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a man.”

“So?”

“I’ve realized that it is the fault of men that there are so many loud cars on the street.”

A loud car passes by. You slap me in the face and continue walking. I know this is actually going to continue until we get home. I call an Uber.

9

We are back on the balcony. The book is dry, but you decide you're not going to read the rest. I pick it up.

"The moon is kind of orangey, isn't it?" you ask.

"It is. How strange."

The lake is lit by the moon's brightness.

"We have to work tomorrow," you say.

"We do."

"When do you have some time off?"

"I'm not sure. Why?"

"If I had an extra ticket, would you leave with me?" you ask. "I hear there are beautiful lakes in Taiwan."

[8.](#) The photograph was first exhibited in Ai's ~~controversial~~ exhibition *Fuck Off*, at the third Shanghai Biennale in 2000. Ai exhibited a series of photographs of him giving "important" monuments around the world the middle finger (including Tiananmen Square, the Eiffel Tower, and the White House). He was flipping off historical buildings in other parts of the world, but when he went to Hong Kong, he decided to flip off buildings of big corporations and offices instead.

[9.](#) Taiwanese Three Cup Chicken (*sānbēiji*) originates from the Jiangxi province of southern China but has become especially popular in Taiwan. There are many legends explaining the dish's origin, one of which takes place during the Song Dynasty. National hero and commander in chief Wen Tianxiang was captured by the Kublai Khan's army during the war. He was tortured for four years. But Wen held his head high and not once did he beg to be set free. A warden of the Kublai Khan army admired Wen's persistence. The night before Wen's execution, the warden mixed three kinds of leftover sauces in the kitchen and made Wen the simple yet surprisingly delicious dish Three Cup Chicken. Wen was grateful and died with a full stomach.

[10.](#) Though Tsingtao is widely regarded as a Chinese beer, Tsingtao Brewery was actually founded by Anglo-German settlers of Hong Kong in 1903.

[11.](#) Wong Kar-wai is an internationally renowned auteur who has won awards at almost every major film festival. Most of his films are about Hong Kong and feature Hong Kong actors. Because Hong Kong is a corporate and profit-oriented city, his films are often

dismissed within the city and considered “too artistic” for people’s taste. However, they are extremely popular in Europe, Mainland China, and Japan.

12. Nat King Cole’s “Te Quiero Dijiste” was one of the songs used in the soundtrack of *In the Mood for Love*, one of Wong Kar-wai’s most successful films. The film explores the relationship between two neighbours who share the mutual knowledge that their spouses are having an affair. Summarizing Wong’s films is kind of pointless. They are explorations of feelings and ideas, less focused on plot. Perhaps that’s why they tend to fail commercially in places like Hong Kong.

13. This, perhaps, is the most famous line in *In the Mood for Love*. By the end of the film, the two characters who share the mutual knowledge that their spouses are having an affair involuntarily fall in love. The man has decided to leave his unfaithful wife and take a job in Singapore. On several occasions, he asks the woman if she would leave with him if he had a ticket for her.

14. Mango pudding originated in India but has become especially popular in Hong Kong.

15. There are many variations of this dessert, including the “original” steamed milk pudding, steamed milk custard, double-boiled steamed milk, double-skinned milk, and steamed milk with egg white. The dessert is simple yet hard to make. The texture of it is smooth and the taste is not too sweet.

Lanterns & Letters

The words 概 and 念 make up the term “concept.” 概 (gài), by itself, means “approximate” or “in general.” And 念 (niàn) means “thought” or “idea,” but it can also mean “read” or “recite.” When put together, 概念, to me at least, means “approximately an idea” or “not quite an idea yet.”

“Is it you?”

*

I didn’t recognize the woman’s voice.

“No,” I said.

She hung up. I went for a jog by the lake. The water was still.

Maybe I could jog to China. I didn’t jog to China. I came back home, made myself breakfast, took a shower while you slept on.

“Are you all packed?” I ask. We are going to Taiwan this evening.

You don’t respond.

I continued to think about the question “Is it you?”

This is a series of “events.” The events also have no centre—no fulcrum, no singular meaning. In the centre of an event is just another chain of events with no centre.

Long ago, there were ten suns in the sky. The suns incinerated all the plants on earth. One day, an archer shot down nine of the ten suns. As a reward, the Queen Mother of the West gave the archer an elixir. The elixir could make him immortal. But there was only enough elixir for one person. The archer didn’t want to be immortal.

All the archer wanted was to live his life with Chang'e, his wife. He didn't drink the elixir, but instead asked Chang'e to keep it safe for him.

One day, one of the archer's students pretended to be ill so he could be relieved from hunting duty. After the archer left to hunt, the student demanded that Chang'e give him the elixir. Chang'e, knowing she would not stand a chance if she tried to fight the student, drank the elixir immediately. The elixir gave her the power to fly. She soared higher and higher until, in the end, she reached the moon and became immortal. The archer was very sad when he received the news of her disappearance. He moved a table under the moon. Every night, he had dinner in the moonlight. He imagined himself having dinner with her.

"Why do you think she drank the elixir?" you asked.

"So that the student wouldn't be able to take it?"

"You're stupid."

I didn't disagree.

"Why would she care if someone else had it? You know what? I think she wanted to be immortal more than she wanted to be with the archer. She was just waiting for the right moment to drink it, so people wouldn't remember her as an elixir-stealing bitch. You're going to have a hard time being immortal if everyone thinks you're a bitch. I mean, why else would her first reaction be to drink the elixir? You know what else?"

"What?"

"I bet the archer suspected she wanted to be immortal more than she wanted to be with him."

"Why?"

"Why else would he let her keep the elixir? It was a test. He wanted to see if she truly loved him."

Again, I didn't disagree.

"You know what I like about that story, though? I like the fact that he gave her the choice to either be immortal or be with him," you said.

"Oh, my God! She's beautiful!" the*Uber driver in Toronto said, as he helped us take our luggage from his trunk. You were walking away from the car to get us a trolley.

"I didn't notice it through the rear-view mirror, but she is something else," he continued. "I don't usually find Asian girls attractive, other than in movies, but she is a beauty! You're a lucky man! What do you do, man?" The driver lifted another piece of luggage from the trunk.

"I'm a translator."

"Cool. What do you translate?"

"A bit of everything. Bulletins, shampoo bottles, instruction manuals."

The driver looked confused. He must have thought I had a more impressive job.

We were landing in Taipei when I *woke. You were taking a picture of me while I slept. I sensed you taking it.

"Good morning, Onion," you said, poking my cheek with your finger. (I am Onion because when I was a child, I had an onion-shaped haircut.)

I had attended a lunch meeting just before we left for Taipei. I had been hired to translate for a Chinese couple. They were interested in Toronto's real estate. We met in the private room of an Italian restaurant in Rosedale.

"I'm glad you agreed to do this for us," said the woman.

"It's my pleasure."

"Would you like something to drink?" asked the man.

I ordered a coffee.

"We asked you to come a little earlier because there is something you need to know before the meeting with the agent begins," said the woman.

The man continued, "We don't really need an interpreter. You are simply here to *act* as an interpreter for us. My wife and I can understand English just fine."

"But we ask you to not let the agents know," said the woman. "When they arrive, we will be speaking only in Mandarin. So please, as you normally would, translate what they say into Mandarin for us."

"We might ask you questions after your translations as well, to make it seem more believable," said the man.

"If you agree to do this, we will pay you three times more than what was agreed upon. Do you agree?"

I nodded.

There were two stern knocks on the door, and two white men entered the room. I introduced the couple and the two agents to each other. I proceeded to translate the agents' words into Mandarin. The couple kept their eyes glued to the agents and responded. The agents did the same. No one looked in my direction.

My translations were no more than meaningless noises. They only served to take up time. I am paid to be here.

"This is so good!" you said, licking* the spoon.

"It is, isn't it? Do you want to share another one?"

"Yeah!"

I ordered another shaved ice.

"You're not too good at Mandarin, are you?"

"What?"

“The waitress paused for a bit and looked a little confused before responding to you. That’s strange. You can read and write it professionally.”

I smiled—out of embarrassment.

I conjured the words *shaved ice*, and the words transformed into an image of shaved ice. Shaved ice is a block of frozen flavoured liquid, shaved into shreds and fitted into a bowl to form a little mountain. The idea became a chain of images, each tied to a different *shaved ice moment*. The shitty one I had in Hong Kong that made me feel ill, the aesthetically pleasing one in Kyoto, the cheap one from New York’s Chinatown. The pronunciation of the words *shaved ice* appeared. I heard the Cantonese pronunciation and saw the ideogram for *shaved ice*—刨冰. I pronounced the characters in Mandarin. I was my own interpreter.

“Do you think Chang’e would have left the archer if the elixir had never existed?” I was trying to change the topic.

The waitress came back with the shaved ice. We ate quickly, competing to see which one of us could eat more. You won.

“Probably not,” you said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Does it matter though? The point of the story is that she left, right?”

“I guess.”

It was July. It was our second day in Taiwan. We were sitting on the patio of a dessert house in the Jiufen mountains.

“Do you have room in your bag?” I asked.

“Why?”

“I have something for you.”

“A bottle of elixir?”

I laughed and handed you the envelope the Chinese woman at the Italian restaurant had given me. The money was inside. I wasn’t sure what such a gesture implied and had no idea what compelled

me to give you the envelope. At that moment, giving you the envelope just felt like the right thing to do.

“What’s in it?” you ask.

“It doesn’t matter. Just keep it with you for now.” You slipped it into your bag without even looking at it.

“Want to go for a stroll around the market now?” you asked.

“Yeah!”

I asked for the bill. You took a picture of me counting change in the Jiufen mountains.

In the restaurant, I continued repeating English words in Mandarin. I saw a glass in front of me. I held the glass. I was not thirsty. I simply felt the need to feel something in my hands. And then I felt I was inside the glass. I had become transparent. My job had made me become transparent, and suddenly I understood—there is no “original text.” The tongue picks parts of concepts that correspond to reality. Words are created. The couple understood English. My translation had no meaning, no concept. I spoke but was not translating. I was transparent.

The real estate meeting ended. I was holding an envelope filled with cash.

“Excuse me, when will we be back* in downtown Taipei?” I asked the driver.

“The traffic is looking good. I’d say in about twenty minutes.”

Shortly after getting into the cab, you fell asleep.

“Young man,” the driver said, his voice deep. “If you don’t mind me asking—are you Chinese?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s something strange about the way you speak. Where are you from?”

“I grew up in Hong Kong.”

"Do you live there?" he asked.

"Not anymore."

"The way you speak seems a little distant. It's as if you don't really believe that the words you're saying are expressing what you want them to say. My wife teaches Chinese, you see. She's much smarter than I am. Because of her, I notice tics and have become more attuned to the nuances of language."

"I wish I had someone like that in my life."

He laughed. "Your vocabulary and pronunciation are both fine. You just need to believe in the language, young man. You know what I mean?"

I had no idea what he meant.

"What does the lady do?" he asked.

"She's a writer and photographer for a cultural magazine. She's also a lot smarter than I am."

"That's so cool! What about you? What do you do, son?"

"I'm a translator," I said in Mandarin. I felt like I was lying. Maybe I really did not believe in the language I was using. From then on, I started feeling like I was lying whenever I spoke in Mandarin.

"You two were speaking in English earlier. Where is she from?" asked the driver.

"From Tokyo. She speaks Japanese and English," I answered.

"You're lucky I don't speak Japanese or English, or else I'd be chatting her up," said the driver half-jokingly.

The taxi was a heterotopia, a dynamic space layered with ever-changing meanings, where social norms are suspended.

"Actually, if she wasn't sleeping, you could translate for me. I'm pretty good with the ladies, you know. Maybe you'd even learn a thing or two from me."

"Maybe."

"Would you mind if I ask you a question, Mr. Translator?"

"Sure."

"You can speak English, Cantonese, and Mandarin, correct?"

"Yes."

"When you think, what language do you think in?"

In heterotopias, new ideas are formed and identities are re-established.

"I don't think I think in language," I answered.

"What do you mean?"

"I think in 概念," I said to the driver. I believed in the words I was using. I didn't feel like I was lying.

"What on earth are you talking about, young man?"

"If we only think in language, it'd be really hard to come up with new ideas. So when I think, I think in *almost ideas*, not language."

"What on earth are you talking about, young man? You must be drunk." The driver laughed.

We were leaving Shifen. Shifen is ^{*}a place famous for its sky lanterns. Sky lanterns are hot-air balloons made of paper. These ones are a metre tall. They're sold along the train tracks running across the Shifen hills. Couples from all around the world were writing on the lanterns. They wrote in their own languages. They wrote wishes and would let their wishes fly into the night sky. You did not write a wish. You drew an onion on our lantern. I felt like I was Chang'e, flying to the moon. I didn't want to be Chang'e.

"Would you like to be immortal?" I asked.

"No," you answered.

As our lantern rose, I noticed you had written something in Japanese on the other side of it.

"What did you write?" I asked.

"I'm not telling you."

The words I did not understand continued to rise. We held hands and watched the onion fly into the sky.

We went to a little noodle shop to have dinner. We sat on the balcony and drank beer. You sat across from me. In the moonlight, we shared a meal before heading back to the city.

I looked out the back window of the taxi. Glowing lanterns inscribed with different languages were rising from the top of the hill. I imagined myself an archer, shooting down the lanterns. The Shifen and Jiufen hills were the inside of my mind. I was my tongue. I was shooting down parts of concepts that did not belong to reality. I was speaking.

I Am the One Who Waits

1

It is very early. You ask me why we are awake.

“I don’t know.” My mouth is dry and my voice cracks a little. I take a sip of water from the glass next to the bed.

“Are you hungry?” Unlike mine, your voice doesn’t crack.

“Not really.” I look out the window and the sky is still dark.

“What is there to do this early on a Saturday morning?” you ask yourself.

For a moment, I cannot remember what we did last night.

We were drinking at a nearby bar with some friends, I finally recall. We got hungry around eleven, ordered a chicken salad, shared it, and went home. Perhaps we are awake because we ate so late. Or not. It doesn’t really matter.

“What is there to do this early on a Saturday morning?” you ask again.

“What do you have to do later today?”

“I just have to reply to some emails. What about you?”

Before going out, I’d already finished all my translation work, cleaned the toilet, cut all the vegetables in the fridge, and placed them in plastic containers. “Nothing,” I say.

You finish the water I’ve poured you, clean the glass, and place it back on the shelf. I find myself looking in the fridge, searching for things to cut.

There’s nothing left for me to cut.

"What are you doing?" you ask.

"Nothing," I answer, a little embarrassed.

"You're weird." You go to the washroom.

"The human race is a monotonous affair," Goethe writes in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. "Most people spend the greatest part of their time working in order to live, and what little freedom remains so fills them with fear that they seek out any and every means to be rid of it."

The towels and napkins are neatly folded. The counter is clean and so are the dishes and utensils.

I open the fridge again.

I stare into the fridge.

I stare into the fridge—

I hear you exit the washroom.

I ask if you'd like some coffee and you say that you would like tea instead.

"You look nice," I say. You've put on contact lenses and a touch of makeup.

"Let's go out!" you say.

I hand you a green mug with green tea inside. You hold the mug with both hands and cool the tea down with your breath. Steam rises from the mug; your cheeks redden.

"Where should we go?" I ask. It's half past six. You are in a white bathrobe and your hair is tied in a bun. I am wearing black discount Calvin Klein boxer briefs from Winners and my hair is a mess. You turn around, lean your back against me, and wrap my arm around your waist.

"Your body is warm," you say as you sip your tea. "This is comfortable. But let's go out. It'll be fun to go out super-early in the morning."

2

I am shaving. You come into the washroom wearing a red sweater dress and a black leather jacket. You lower the toilet cover and sit down.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Watching you shave." Your chin rests on your palm.

I give you a smile; my face is covered in shaving cream.

A year ago, you wouldn't be sitting on the toilet waiting for me; if you'd awoken early and wanted to go out, you'd simply leave. "Am I in love?—yes, since I am waiting. The other one never waits.

Sometimes I want to play the part of the one who doesn't wait; I try to busy myself elsewhere, to arrive late, but I always lose at this game. Whatever I do, I find myself there, with nothing to do, punctual, even ahead of time. The lover's fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits" (Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*). While I waited for you, I would write. A part of me always thought that if I wrote about you enough, you'd stop disappearing.

"Are you almost ready?" you ask.

"Yup."

You look up from your phone. "It was rumoured that the Empress Dowager Cixi would sometimes bathe herself in sperm."

"What?"

"She thought it would stop her from aging."

"How interesting." I continue shaving.

"How many people do you think it would take to fill our bath with sperm?" you ask. "If each person only ejaculates once?"

"Twenty-thousandish?"¹⁶ I say, after thinking about it for a moment.

You consider my answer. "That sounds about right. Can you imagine contributing to that bath?" You stand up. Your arms are behind your back and your head is held high. "The hour has come to prepare for me a bath filled with semen," you say. You point at me. "Are you ready, sir?"

"Yes, I have consumed a large amount of protein today and am ready to partake in the preparation of the bath, your highness." I bow. Half of my face is still covered in shaving cream.

"That is well. Please proceed to the bathtub and ejaculate. You have two minutes," you say.

I bow again, take off my boxer briefs.

"Ew, stop."

"Fine." I reach down for my underpants.

"Wait," you say. You are seated on the toilet again. Your legs are crossed. "Come closer." You put your palms on my ass and hold me close. Your voice becomes gentle.

Your fingers are warm, and your lips, soft. "I have so much in me, and the feeling for her absorbs it all" (Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*).

3

Half an hour later we are downstairs. You ask me what I did on Saturday mornings when I was a child and I tell you that I went to basketball practice and Kumon.

"I never went to Kumon," you reply. "How was it? Did it help?"

"I don't know. I can't say I became good at math."

"Okay," you say, making me feel stupid. "I used to take cello lessons. I was really good, but don't think I liked it that much."

"What didn't you like about it?" I ask. The sky is brighter now, and I hear birds.

Instead of answering me, you stay silent. You look as if you are thinking about something, so I decide to not interrupt. We cross the road and approach the streetcar stop. I cannot recall the last time I walked the streets this early in the morning. I'd forgotten how much I like the smell of mornings.

"Do you sometimes feel like you were raised to follow these nonsensical hegemonic codes your entire life, just so you would one day feel like you belong?" you finally ask, when we are seated on the streetcar. We decide to take the streetcar to Chinatown. Through the window, we see the streetcar pass the CN Tower and the Air Canada Centre.

"Do you?" I ask.

"I felt like my parents just wanted me to be good at the cello so they could show off in front of their friends," you continue. "And it always seemed weird to me that they made me learn the cello. Why didn't I learn something like the koto, or the guzheng, or something like the steel pans? Oh my god! I would have been so happy if I took steel-pan lessons instead. I'd be so cool. If you see pictures of me playing the cello, you'd see that I look serious—angry almost. But if I had learned to play steel pans, my childhood would have been so much more interesting." You put your arm through mine. "Little me, playing the steel pans. Wouldn't that have been cool?"

"I think so."

"You know what I like about the steel pans or the hang?"

"Tell me."

"There's flow. The sound is continuous. One note moves to another smoothly, so the transitions between different parts of the song are subtle. In comparison, Vivaldi's music is like a teenage boy masturbating."

"What?"

"Yeah. Not only are the transitions obvious, Vivaldi, especially, spends so much time on the bridge. It's like he's about to cum but is holding back—just a little bit longer, just a bit—and then, bam—loud finish, orgasm, done, and the audience claps. I think masturbating is healthy. I just don't like music that resembles male orgasms."

Our streetcar passes the LCBO at King and Spadina. It's closed. As the LCBO leaves my field of vision, I start imagining you playing the steel pans. The image comforts me; I'm not sure why.

"Let's get back to the nonsensical hegemonic codes thing. What did you mean by that?"

"Okay, close your eyes and picture this: an Asian girl and a white guy."

I close my eyes, expecting you to say more. "Wait, that's it?" I open my eyes.

"Quite easy to imagine, huh?" you say.

"Yes?"

"I think the reason I had to learn the cello is the same reason there are so many Asian girls with white guys. You see what I'm saying?"

"Kind of?"

"I love how the cello sounds and enjoy listening to classical music," you say. "I just think it's important, when playing or learning it, to think critically about why you're learning it and what about the instrument appeals to you."

"Your mind works in a really strange way, you know?"

You ignore my remark, so I start staring at the empty streets. Leaves fall from trees and some land on the windows of the streetcar, but the streetcar doesn't seem to care; it continues moving toward its fixed destination.

"Once, when I was visiting my parents in Hong Kong," I say, "I was offered a summer job. I read the contract and saw that my pay was by the month, but when I divided it by the hour, it was far lower

than the minimum wage. I went home and told my parents, and my father said if I couldn't tolerate that, I was a weak person. He said all of these jobs require a certain amount of suffering when you start. I said that wasn't the point; it was the fact they were taking advantage of loopholes in the laws that were implemented to protect workers, and saying this was normal was only perpetuating the problem. He just gave me a sarcastic chuckle and said: 'No one cares.'"

"What was the place that hired you?"

"It was a Club Monaco in Hong Kong Island's financial district."

"Did you take the job?"

"No, I went on to interview for a job at a bank—the Bank of China."

"What? Wait, but you suck at math."

"I was walking through a job fair and one of the scouts started talking to me and so I went for the interview. I got the job too. The manager said I was tall enough and would be good at convincing rich housewives to buy insurance."

"Oh, wow. How did being objectified make you feel?"

I have no idea how to respond to that. The Spadina streetcar heading toward Bloor stops at Queen Street. I stare as the only other passenger gets off. I wonder why he's out so early.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" you ask. "You're weak. You need to get used to being objectified if you want to succeed." You pat me on the head. "Hearing myself say that makes me want to smoke. Do you have cigarettes?"

We get off the streetcar. Neither of us has any cigarettes. Minutes later, we forget we want to smoke.

"What is the destiny of man, but to fill up the measure of his sufferings, and to drink his allotted cup of bitterness?" (Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*)

You say there are always places open in Chinatown, so here we are. As you said, there are many restaurants and shops open.

“Chinatown smells so Chinatowny,” you say. I look at the rows of cardboard boxes on the side of the street. There are puddles even though there was no rain. I see fresh vegetables, fruit, and eggs in red plastic baskets. We try to go into a grocery store, but a man comes out and tells us they’re not yet open.

“If you tell me what you want, I’ll bring it to you—but you can’t come in yet,” he says.

I thank him, tell him we just wanted to look around, and he goes back to work before I can apologize for interrupting. We settle in a cha chaan teng and order congee and milk tea—a combination you don’t think would work but which is surprisingly pleasant and warm. The doors opened not too long ago, I can tell. They have just mopped the floor; it’s still wet. I sip my milk tea and start imagining how lonely a day would feel if I woke up early in the morning alone.

“If I acknowledge my dependency, I do so because for me it is a means of signifying my demand: in the realm of love, futility is not a ‘weakness’ or an ‘absurdity’: it is a strong sign: the more futile, the more it signifies and the more it asserts itself as strength” (Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*).

I reach out my hand, and you place your hand in mine. The table is a little wet, and we can hear the noise of the ventilation. I look around and see two old men reading newspapers and drinking tea.

“Every day one should at least hear one little song, read one good poem, see one fine painting and—if at all possible—speak a few sensible words” (Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*).

The owner turns on the radio; Taylor Swift starts singing. You are holding my hand and eating congee.

1616. I'm quite bad at math but for some reason got this one right. According to parameters developed by the World Health Organization, the average volume of ejaculate for men is 3.7 ml. Taking an average from studies conducted by the *Daily Mail*, the *Independent*, and the *BBC*, 80L of water is used in a typical bath: $80 \text{ L}/3.7 \text{ ml} = 21,621.6$.

I Am Writing about a Hole

Prologue

A white German artist—based in New York—visited Bali and became enlightened by the Buddha. She then used her newly enlightened mind to create statues of the Buddha covered in emerald, gold, and crystal. She was so enlightened that before she could even get used to this new transcendent state, ideas like waterfalls flowed into her mind. The statues, she decided, would wear T-shirts with iconic images by Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol, Coco Chanel, Franco Moschino, Louis Vuitton, Paul Smith, Balmain, Takashi Murakami, and Yayoi Kusama printed all over. These T-shirts would be made with emeralds. Another idea rushed into the German artist’s mind: the statues would also have mohawks in glittering colours. Another idea: a gold Buddha, laughing and holding up his middle finger with the words *brilliant, mother, and fucker* on its body. (In the transcendent state of mind, *motherfucker* is not one word, but two.) Finally, she had to give her brilliant series a name—“*Punk Buddha*,” whispered her inner self.

1

The first time I encountered the hole was when I was in high school. It was during a basketball game. The game was close. I was on a fast break. I scored. The person guarding me called me a “skinny chink.” When the game ended, I stared at my shadow. The shadow became the hole.

When the hole is present, the part of you that wants to speak vanishes and you lose the desire to say anything—like when you lose your appetite after drinking too much coffee.

The condition, however, is not permanent. Some people can break free from the hole quite easily—while some don't even sense the hole's existence. And some people can simply swallow the hole or vomit it out; I'm not sure how they do that, but I've seen it happen. Most people, however, just have to wait until the hole's existence is slowly forgotten—until the next time it appears.

After that, I encountered the hole two more times.

Years had passed. I was no longer the skinny-chink point guard I once was. I met you. You urged me to eat more, and I gained a little bit of weight. We moved to Toronto and, because of your influence, I began to frequent galleries.

"Good afternoon. Is there a particular piece you're interested in?" the manager asks. It is spring. It is a Saturday. We are strolling through the streets of Toronto in search of a nice place to have a drink. We come across a new gallery.

"Yes, the statues of the Buddha caught our attention, so we decided to come in."

"Oh, yes! They're from New York," says the manager. I later find out they are actually from Miami. "Covered from top to bottom in precious gemstones," he continues, "these statues resemble the Buddha sitting in a Buddha-style pose."

"Buddha-style pose?" I am a little confused. I have never heard anyone call it that.

"Yes, and the spiked mohawk gives the Buddha an edgy modern feel, don't you think?"

"Is there a story behind this?" you ask.

"Well, the artist was enlightened when she was in Bali."

"In Bali?" I ask.

You give me a look. "Excuse him, please go on," you say to the manager.

"After her enlightenment, she decided to create these. They're really popular. Guess who was here yesterday?"

"Who?"

"Drake's interior decorator—Ferris Rafauli."

"Okay," I say.

The manager, excited, takes out his phone and shows us a Story on Drake's Instagram page. The diamond Buddha is sitting on a marble table in Drake's penthouse. The caption reads: [@FerrisRafauli](#) *gifted me something special for my bday.*

When the Story ends, there is a prolonged silence. Between the three of us, our shadows meet and the hole appears in the middle of the gallery. I stare into its bottomless darkness.

"Yeah, this statue is a hit or miss," the white manager says. "So, what do you guys do?" The presence of the hole keeps me silent. You too do not respond. The manager is the type who doesn't sense the hole's existence, and so is the enlightened German artist.

The following paragraph is paraphrased from the enlightened artist's bio:

The enlightened one's name is Metis Atahs, a Fine Art artist who is as dynamic as the pieces she meticulously sketches, sculpts, and brings to life. She is German by nationality but is truly a citizen of the world. Her vast global travel to places far and wide eventually led her to the inlet of Miami Beach, a place of transcendence and enlightenment. After successfully operating her own investor relations consultancy boutique in Munich in 2006, Metis, who graduated in political science and economics, decided to turn her devotion and passion for art, design, and fashion into the creation of one-of-a-kind sculptures that redefine what it means to be alive.

We leave the gallery.

It is a gallery in Yorkville—Lumas.

I feel the same silence from the gallery following us. We do not talk.

The second time I encountered the hole was at a restaurant. This time, no one called me a chink.

I had just finished studying at the library and decided to go eat. I was with two friends. You were out of town at the time. You called me, so I went to a corner of the restaurant and answered your call. I was wearing a black turtleneck sweater and loose-fit cotton chinos. The chinos were grey. It was an evening in November. While I was on the phone with you, a blond man with a beard, beer in hand, came toward me and said, "Why the fuck are you wearing track pants?"

I told you to hold on and explained to him that my pants weren't track pants.

"We're at a club—why are you wearing track pants at a club, man?"

I repeated to him that I wasn't wearing track pants. I added that it was, in fact, not a club but a restaurant.

"You shouldn't be wearing track pants at a club," the man repeated. He wore a black T-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots.

I pictured Clint Eastwood. I started remembering a scene in a Western I once saw where Clint Eastwood was shooting Mexicans. Throughout the film, Clint never smiled. The man in front of me was still talking. And I saw Clint Eastwood talking to an empty chair. Each time the guy spoke was louder than the last. I saw Clint Eastwood raising his voice as he questioned an empty chair at the Republican National Convention. People were starting to look. I decided to call you back. "I don't think you're listening to me," I said to Clint Eastwood. "This is not a club, these aren't track pants, and even if they are, I don't understand why it's any of your business."

"Because people shouldn't be wearing track pants at a club."

I wonder, if I wasn't an "oriental" (I don't usually think of this word, but at the time, the word appeared to me), would the man be confronting me about my pants like that? Was he, in a way, talking to me as if I didn't understand the cultural norms of this society? I bet if a tall white model had walked into the restaurant in track pants, Eastwood wouldn't be complaining. Actually, he might still be. I couldn't help but wonder.

We were standing opposite each other. The hole appeared where my shadow met his. I didn't say another word to Eastwood. I didn't call you back that night. Eastwood continued to talk. Eventually, a waiter came over and asked the man to go back to his table.

He was drunk. He thought we were in a club. He thought I was wearing track pants. He did not understand what I was telling him. Or rather, he chose not to understand. To him, what he thought was all that mattered.

In a way, Eastwood and I were speaking two different languages.

In an essay entitled "Nothing Is Sacred," from his book *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*, Salman Rushdie recalled a lecture by Arthur Koestler, who proposed that it is not territory that causes aggression but language. Language, Koestler claimed, when it reaches a certain level of sophistication, becomes able to express abstract concepts—acquires the power of totemization. People go to wars to defend totems, Koestler added. As evidence, he related a story about two groups of monkeys in the northern islands of Japan. The two groups of monkeys lived close to each other, in the woods, near a stream. Naturally, they ate bananas, lots of bananas. One of the groups, at some point, developed a rather strange habit. They started washing their bananas before eating them. The other group left their bananas unwashed. Despite their differences, the two groups continued to live peacefully, as neighbours. And the reason behind their being able to live without conflict, Koestler claimed, is

because of language. Should their language be sophisticated enough, they would have the ability to totemize their banana-washing. Thus, wet and dry bananas would become totems—sacred objects—the centre of each tribe’s beliefs—resulting in two separate sets of ideologies in the region—two religions—leading to a holy war. At this point, a young man proposed to Koestler that it is perhaps because of the fact there were enough bananas for all the monkeys that they didn’t fight. Koestler was angered by this student’s question and refused to respond to this Marxist bullshit. In a sense, Koestler was not wrong, Rushdie noted. Koestler and the student were speaking different languages; it was their language that was in conflict. This disagreement could be read as evidence of Koestler’s argument. Koestler, in this case, is a banana-washing monkey and the student eats bananas unwashed. Their language, more sophisticated than that of Japanese monkeys, resulted in totemizations: the primal state of language vs. the primal state of economics. Each of them now needed to defend their totems. They were effectively at war.

3

We are sitting at a patio. It is a sunny afternoon. We are now drinking. You, a martini, and I, a gin and tonic. The words *brilliant*, *mother*, and *fucker* that were written on a golden Buddha’s chest are now floating in my mind.

You stand up and walk away. I do not ask where you are going. Minutes go by. You return.

“I just puked,” you say. “But nothing came out.”

I am confused.

“I just puked. I’m sure I puked, I felt all the sensations of puking, but when I was done, I looked into the toilet and nothing was there.”

I pass you a glass of water.

“Thanks.”

The hole that was once between us now exists only in me. You destroyed your part of the hole—by puking.

You finish the entire glass of water. “I hate *Lost in Translation*,” you say, out of nowhere. “The film *Lost in Translation*. I hate it,” you continue. “Watching the film made me a little uncomfortable, but I wasn’t sure why. After seeing those Buddha statues, I realize that I hate that film. I hate that it won so many awards and that so many people love it so much!” There is a pause. And then you continue, “Someone told me to watch it last week, saying I’d like it. After seeing the film, I said nothing and went home. But now I realize I hate it.”

You too have encountered the hole before, I realize.

You don’t seem to notice that I have yet to regain the desire to speak. You order another round. You continue to talk about the film.

I agree with all your points. I hate the film as well. This is why:

Lost in Translation centres on Bill Murray’s character, an American movie star, and Scarlett Johansson, an American journalist, and their experiences of loneliness in a foreign country. They meet and spend most of their time in Tokyo’s Park Hyatt—an American hotel filled with tourists. Murray is married and Johansson has a fiancé or something. It isn’t until they meet each other that they actually go out to explore Tokyo. As with most films that follow Hollywood tropes, they develop feelings for each other, but in the case of this film, they try to maintain a platonic relationship. The only thing that draws them together seems to be the fact that they are both lonely foreigners in Japan.

Throughout the film, never once does Murray's character try to understand the culture that surrounds him, which is why he feels out of place.

There is a scene where Bill Murray's character is crammed in an elevator with a number of Japanese businessmen, all of whom are shorter than him. The film really emphasizes the fact that Murray, the American movie star visiting Tokyo, is uncomfortable because he is tall and the others around him are short. We see Murray's face, uncomfortable, almost irritated by the fact that he's in this elevator. As viewers, when watching the scene, we are supposed to find the uncomfortable situation that our white-guy protagonist is in to be humorous. Why the stereotype that Asian men are shorter is funny, I do not know.

In a later scene, Murray is filming a Suntory commercial with an enthusiastic Japanese director. The director goes into an extended monologue in Japanese about how he wants the commercial to look. The translator, however, when translating for the director, simply says, "Turn, look to the camera with intensity, and say, 'It's Suntory time.'" Murray doubts the translator. The director then goes into another monologue and the translator translates what the director said as "Turn slower."

I wonder if Sofia Coppola was enlightened as well.

It is evident that like the German artist, Koestler and his student, and Clint Eastwood at the bar, Coppola, when looking at Asia, has affixed a Western point of view—she is speaking her own language: *Americanese*.

In the commercial scene, the translator's translation is not inaccurate but simplified so that Murray's character can understand. It is important to note that the American release of the film did not bother to add subtitles to the director's speech—an indication that

Coppola is fixated on an Orientalist's point of view; in other words, the ignorant Orientalist director is saying that, in order to find her scene humorous, we need to first accept the following colonial premise: that the English language and Americans are superior.

In creating such a film, Coppola is looking down on a culture, and at the same time solidifying the white American man's status in the world. It's a kind of propaganda/masturbation tool for American men and, to Asians, a colonial gesture—basically propaganda, typical of most Hollywood movies, and to be expected from the spoiled daughter of a privileged, Americancentric, overrated, and likewise culturally ignorant director.

Fuck Apocalypse Now.

I realize that the paragraph above is aggressive. I do not wish to be in the situation Koestler was in—I do not wish to be at war. I always disliked the word *war*. I wonder if there are ways to defend my totem without being overcome by emotions.

5

We are home. The hole is still there. You are asleep. Still, I feel no desire to speak. Staring at the cactus on my desk, I realize I have no idea how to talk about such issues with calmness, but unlike Koestler, I don't believe starting a war is the best response. If I had reacted physically toward the opponent who called me a "skinny chink," I would have gotten a technical foul, or perhaps even been suspended, and that would have hurt my team. If I had started an argument with Eastwood, I would have caused a scene and been kicked out of the restaurant—and my friends would have had to leave in the middle of dinner. The fact that I am the subject of repression and still feel like it is my fault if I react goes to show how power works and how unjust society is.

Therefore, I decide to look for ways to deal with such issues without getting angry.

Contemporary Chinese literature has a delicate way of incorporating social critique. Nobel Prize laureate Mo Yen, whose name literally translates to “don’t speak,” said in an interview with *Time Magazine*, “A writer should bury his thoughts deep and convey them through the characters in his novel. One of the biggest problems in literature is the lack of subtlety.” In most of his work, Mo Yen uses hallucinatory realism to blur reality and dream, fact and imagination, to create narratives where the social critiques are disguised within a fictitious, dreamlike world in which nothing can be taken literally—yet there still exists a sense that the narrative is about something true and relevant.

For Mo Yen, writing directly engaged literature is impossible because of state oppression. Writers in the past have always utilized different methods to address issues when being direct is impossible. Traditionally, many East Asian folktales are political allegories or parables.

I come to the conclusion that, for me at least, the way to do so is to address the issue indirectly.

Haruki Murakami, in his book *After the Quake*, writes a collection of stories set in the aftermath of the catastrophic 1995 Kobe earthquake. Other than the title and the back of the book, however, the earthquake is only vaguely referenced and is never an explicit part of the plot; instead, in all of the stories, dreams and real-life nightmares are impossible to tell apart. There is also, throughout the book, a lack of emotion—synonymous with one’s numbed state of mind in the aftermath of a disastrous earthquake. In my opinion, not confronting and not including the earthquake in the plot allows its

presence to become ubiquitous, making its absence continuous throughout the entire book, leaving the reader without a sense of security, as if the theme—earthquake—is lying beneath the narrative, ready to strike and destroy all things at any moment, creating even more provocative stories.

Perhaps the most relevant example that comes to mind is the ending of Yōko Tawada's novella *Persona*. *Persona* tells the story of Michiko, a Japanese graduate school student studying in Germany. Whenever Michiko is walking on the street, people stare at her and some even approach her to ask if she is Japanese because she "doesn't look Japanese enough." At the end of the story, Michiko decides to put on a Noh mask.

Michiko's Noh mask is made in Spain. Mrs. Steiff asks if that means it is fake. Michiko, perhaps because of Mrs. Steiff's question, feels a sense of closeness to the mask. Michiko asks Mrs. Steiff, in return, if Noh masks made in Spain are fake, then aren't Japanese automobiles also fake?

Michiko gently puts the mask on her face and stares into the mirror. She feels powerful, that her body is much larger, and all the thoughts she was unable to put into words earlier became clear. Michiko went outside with the mask on.

Most people crossed Michiko's line of vision and immediately disappeared. A woman looked at her and froze in place. Michiko does not feel like she is wearing a mask. Walking down the street, she felt as if she were completely bare, possessing a decorative body to be judged for its beauty, but also a body that possessed a powerful language of its own.

She boards the train, but no one looks at Michiko directly. People start moving aside once they see her. She feels eyes watching her from behind and voices whispering. Someone murmurs the words *mental hospital* but she is unfazed. She is excited, feels liberated

from a specific, individual face. For the first time in a long time, she is able to hold her chest high and walk boldly through the crowd.

Tawada, in this story, defends her totem by bringing attention to orientalist points of view. By putting on a mask that is unquestionably Japanese, Michiko is putting in the forefront what orientalists would *expect* from a Japanese person—an exaggeration of the orientalist's expectation. Michiko's mask forces those around her to confront their orientalist assumptions. As she walks through the streets, the Germans, seeing her, become aware of their orientalist gaze.

"I can't sleep," you murmur. "Let's get high."

I nod.

"What are you reading?" you ask, and pass me the joint.

I cannot talk. Instead, I show you the enlightened German artist's website and her artist statement on my phone. You start reading her statement to me.

Epilogue

The objects created by Metis are inspired by the ancient teachings of DAOISM (on her website, “Daoism” is in all caps). DAO (again, in all caps) means “path”/“way” of life. She also adds that DAOISTS focus on nature and the relationship between humanity and the cosmos, while putting an emphasis on health and longevity. She goes on about action through inaction before telling us her pieces are mirrors of our souls, whatever that means.

Around this point, you start laughing. “I don’t think I’ve ever read anything like this.”

Metis ends her statement by telling us that to understand her work, one must understand her journey, the things greater than herself as well as the source of her inner being. To understand one’s own thinking is to understand all thinking, allowing the mind to fall in love with itself. Love is not proven. It is unseen. It is an experience in itself and it is happy.

I take another drag, and the hole, whose presence I felt throughout the day, disappears; like the weather, it has changed its form, and now we are speaking the same language.

Kafka's Guide to Love

Part I

You are one of those Chinese boys born in West End Vancouver in the mid-1990s. You are now in your early twenties. You are, while working on your book, a freelance translator. Sometimes you teach part-time at a university writing centre. You have never had a full-time job in your life and you live on your own in a small condo in downtown Toronto, making around \$4,000 a month before taxes; you bought bitcoins with your scholarship money when the price was low and sold at the right time. You get by—you go to parties once or twice a month, and you can dine at nice restaurants once every two weeks or so. You do not have a car. You tell yourself you’re helping the environment by not driving, but you’re actually just afraid of the responsibility. You also drink too much. You think you dress well—sort of luxe-athletic (to remind people that you play sports). In the winter, you wear Cole Haans to work, with cotton slacks, a sweater or shirt, and a wool coat. On your days off, you wear white Adidas sneakers, skinny black sweatpants, loose-fit pullover sweaters, and the same coat. You work out four times a week and play basketball once a week. During the day, you wear contact lenses and, when it gets late, you put on black-framed glasses.

You go on dates once in a while—nothing too serious. The last time you were in love was when you were twenty: a girl from Tokyo. You lived together and travelled to many places. It lasted for three years; she returned to Japan. You tried long-distance, but she was too popular, getting DMs from guys every day—some of them famous. Her responses to your messages became less frequent; your phone calls did not last more than a half-hour. Three months after she left for Japan, you began noticing well-known musicians, artists, and curators commenting on her Instagram posts. One day, you saw a blue checkmark next to her name on her profile page.

You checked her Twitter—11.5K followers. You became insecure; you wondered why she was still dating you. At the same time, your book—the first book you have ever decided to write—is, among many things, about her. The book is not complete. You are still wondering how to end it. This is why you are writing this chapter: “Kafka’s Guide to Love.”

After a long conversation (it could have been a short one, but you were being clingy), you two decided to see other people; that was six months after she left.

One day—around eight months after she left—she calls you, telling you she is going to work with an artist, a sculptor in Prague. “It would be nice to see you there,” she says. “We can spend a week together. I booked an Airbnb in an Old Prague building. Do you think you can take some time off?”

You pretend to think about it, pretend to have to check your schedule. You tell her you’ll call her back. You take a long hot bath and drink a beer. You call her back.

“Yes, I can take some time off. Let’s meet in Prague.”

There is really no reason for you to say no. You’ve had no interest in any of the women you’ve been dating. Likewise, your dates do not seem too interested in you—you’re not exactly the coolest or most exciting person. You haven’t had sex in a month or two. You always thought you preferred older women, but you started to have second thoughts after a short fling with Julia Choi—a senior manager of a marketing firm; that was exactly two months ago, the last time you had sex. Julia Choi never replied to any of your texts after the weekend you spent at her apartment. She was the only one you actually took an interest in. You use some of your bitcoin money to buy a return-trip ticket to Prague.

You go to your storage locker to get your suitcase—a generic black Samsonite (see what I mean by “you’re not exactly the coolest or most exciting”?) The storage room is located in the parking lot,

and every time you go there you are reminded that you are too afraid to drive a car. You email the professor you work for at the writing centre to ask for time off. He simply says, "Not a problem." His quick and casual response makes you wonder, for a moment, how important you actually are. You pack four sets of your workday outfits and a set of clothes you plan to sleep in—basketball shorts and a T-shirt (to remind her that you play sports). The day before you head to the airport, you wonder if you should get her a gift. You decide to bring her something casual. So, being the boring person you are, you get her a basket of chocolate from SOMA Chocolatemaker, a chocolate place near your condo building.

Before you board your flight, you text her, telling her you'll arrive in the morning. She replies, asking you to meet her at a café near her apartment. A friend of hers is travelling in Prague, and they're supposed to meet for brunch. She asks you to join them.

You arrive at Café Savoy in Old Town Prague. The interior design of the place looks French for some reason, with chandeliers and marble tiles. It is noon and you see old men in suits drinking beer. You ask the hostess if there's a reservation for three and the hostess asks you if it is under your ex-girlfriend's name; hearing her name for the first time in a while, you feel a brief sadness. You follow the hostess to the table, and ten minutes later you hear her name again. This time it is Harold Li who says it, asking if you are her friend. Harold Li is the friend she is meeting for brunch.

She is, as usual, late.

Harold Li takes off his aviators and shakes your hand before turning around to hang up his trench coat. He's in a turtleneck and tight blue chinos, tanned, more clean-cut than handsome, though you can see how some people would find his type attractive; actually, to tell you the truth, most people would. His hair is combed back and his face perfectly shaved. He bikes to work, he tells you. You are a little jealous—his body indicates that he plays sports, while

you rely on the clothes you wear to send that message. Everything about him screams: *I was brought up well*. Whenever you meet someone like this, you feel a trace of discomfort. Such people always seem to you inauthentic, like he was manufactured by some upper-middle-class factory that makes upper-middle-class humans. Harold Li tells you he is from New York (no surprise), and you tell him you live in a small condo in Toronto. "Cool," is his response. "I've been there once. Great place." There are no further comments from Harold Li on the topic of Toronto. Harold Li works for a trading company. He hands you his business card with a picture of him in a black suit, his hands crossed in front of his chest. (See what I mean by inauthentic?) "So, what do you do?" he asks with a smile. His smile, rather than conveying friendliness, says: *I have a good and stable job, do you?* You feel as if you are being tested, that Harold Li is going to, depending on your answer, decide if you are worth his attention.

It always ends up like this with people like Harold Li. The Harold Lis of the world are always the standard that you are forced to measure up to. You wonder if that is because of the way you present yourself. You are wearing black cotton slacks and a light pink button-down shirt. Your shirt is untucked, of course, unlike his sweater, which is tucked in, so he can show his belt—Burberry. Subtle. From a distance, it just looks like a normal black belt, but if you pay attention, you can see the check pattern.

"I'm a translator," you say. "I translate things from Chinese to English and vice versa."

"Cool, dude. What do you translate?"

"A bit of everything: pamphlets providing information on heart disease, words that go on shampoo bottles. You know, things people sometimes read but don't really remember reading."

There is a pause. Harold Li is deciding if you are joking or not. You are not.

Harold Li chuckles and sips his coffee. "You're a funny guy."

Fuck you, Harold Li.

"Thank you," you say, and force a smile.

"What did you study in university?" Harold Li asks.

"Film," is your answer.

"I did a double major in economics and political science. I also minored in international relations and modern art. I never thought I'd get a minor in modern art. I just started taking one class after another whenever I had time. I was interested, and ended up graduating with a minor in it."

"I also have an MFA in creative writing." The words burst out of your mouth. You have, without even noticing, engaged in a dick-measuring competition with Harold Li. How the fuck that happened, you do not know. Harold Lis bring out the worst in you.

"Cool! Where'd you get your MFA?"

"The University of Guelph."

"Sorry, I don't think I've ever heard of—"

"I don't blame you. Where did you go to school?"

"Duke." *Of course.*

You think you're elegant, sipping beer from a thin glass. Harold Li orders a large pint. You wonder if she's had sex with Harold Li.

Probably not, you think, comforting yourself; he's not really her type.

"While I was waiting, when I first arrived at the restaurant, I read that Kafka and his theatre friends used to hang out here," you say to Harold Li.

His response is, again, "Cool." Harold Li ends conversations he's not interested in. In a way, that quality reminds you of her—your now ex-girlfriend—and you feel, again, a trace of sadness. The ability to lose interest in a conversation without feeling the need or obligation to pretend you are interested is also something you wish you could have. You are officially jealous of Harold Li—the first time you've felt jealousy in a long time.

She arrives a half-hour later in a white coat with white fur on the hood, a tight, knee-length black sweater-dress, black boots, and rose-gold hoop earrings. The moment she walks in, you realize you still love her. You love how she's always a little late. You love the way she presents herself as clumsy but is actually clever and a great conversationalist. You and Harold Li both stand up to greet her. You're a little taller than Harold Li, you can't help but notice. You hate yourself for noticing. She gives Harold Li a hug before she says your name and hugs you, whispers in your ear that she's glad to see you. She smells like jasmine. You miss how she smells. For the next two hours, the three of you talk while drinking beer and having English breakfast. That's what Café Savoy—a Czech café founded in the 1800s—serves: English breakfast. All the while, she is posting pictures of her food to her Instagram Story. You learn that she met Harold Li at a party in Tokyo when he was travelling with his "buds" and that they became friendly. Harold Li talks about the restaurants and clubs he goes to in New York City and the celebrities he's met. He mentions something about meeting Lindsay Lohan once and describes how his friend made out with her. The way he presents the series of events is in no way pretentious; he speaks as if he is almost embarrassed. You are almost charmed by him, but because of that, you hate him more. You have never met Lindsay Lohan, probably because of how boring you are.

She talks to you about her experience working on the recent Yoshimoto Nara exhibition, how stressful the planning process was, how Nara has a young cult following, and how Takashi Murakami's gallery took an interest in him. You are intrigued, not so much by the subject, but by her. You never imagined she would thrive in the art scene like this—working with big names and organizing events. Harold Li remains silent over the course of this conversation. You find that strange, considering the fact that Harold Li has a minor in modern art from Duke.

At some point, Harold Li asks you, "So, where are you staying?"

Instead of answering, you shoot a glance at her. She says, "With me. I booked an Airbnb near here."

The cheque arrives not too long after. Harold Li, who, after three large beers, is a little tipsy and at this point has lost interest in both of you, still offers to pay, saying that brunch was his idea and he appreciates you making it, even though you had just landed. You know there is no point in refusing, so you thank him. The rest of the afternoon you will spend alone with her, as Harold Li has plans to meet another one of his friends for dinner. (The way he makes the word *friend* sound feminine incites your jealousy further.)

Part II

You walk with her around Old Town Prague, stare at old buildings, and pass through narrow streets. The two of you hold hands as you walk across the Charles Bridge. *Faust*, the Goethe play, is being performed in the National Theatre on the other side of the bridge; there is a huge poster. *In the end, Faust kills himself. Or was it Werther who kills himself in the end?* You are not sure. You are, however, sure that both of them were at some point in love.

At the end of the bridge, a clown in a red clown costume says to you: *Konichiwa, sir! Would you care to stab me?* And then he hands you a knife—one of those medieval knives with red rubies embedded in the handle. She is taking a picture of you and the clown. You refuse to stab the clown, saying to him you'd rather not stab him and you're not Japanese. You also realize that the clown has yellow teeth. Last night you were at work in Toronto, and the next day you are in Prague having brunch with Harold Li and your ex-girlfriend, realizing you still love her. A clown in a red clown costume is asking if you'll stab him. You look at the statues on the Charles Bridge. They do not look back. You look at her. She is photographing you and the clown. Nothing feels real.

You are now in an old Czech restaurant having dinner. The lights are dim. With your knife, you carefully slice off a thin piece of bread dumpling—a soggy piece of white dough soaked in lukewarm gravy, topped with cranberry sauce—and put it in your mouth. The food too does not feel *real*.

You look to the table next to yours and see an old German couple. They are looking through the photographs they took on a large Nikon camera. They are smiling. You look at her, your ex. She is drinking beer. She is blushing a little and she has one of her hands on your lap. You wonder if you two will grow old like the German

couple you are staring at. You ask if you can see the photos she took. The first photo you see is that of the clown, handing you a knife, asking you to stab him. *Konichiwa, sir*, the clown had said. *Would you care to stab me?*

You put down her phone and continue eating bread dumplings.

That night, you return to the old apartment she has rented. The walls are painted white and there is nothing but a queen-size mattress in the room. She kisses you, undresses you, and falls into the bed with you.

You are jet-lagged. You get up in the middle of the night. It is dark, and outside the window, you see the Vltava River. The street lights reflect off the surface of the still water. You go into the kitchen and light the candle on the table. You eat a banana and turn on the TV. Because she is asleep, you do not turn on the volume. You watch a Czech anchor in a grey suit speaking without sound. It makes no difference to you; you don't speak a word of Czech. An hour later, you crawl back into bed. In your dream, Harold Li is in a red clown costume and you stab him with a ruby-encrusted knife.

She has to spend the next day meeting with the sculptor. Before she goes off to work, you have breakfast together next to the river. The sky is grey. It looks like it's about to rain. There are birds and tourists and gothic statues everywhere. She leaves, and you decide to go to the Kafka Museum. You walk up the stairs and enter a dark room. You sit down to watch the exhibition film. Kafka, at one point, describes Prague as having claws, saying there is no way to escape it, unless you burn the city down from both ends. He never did. He never escaped Prague. You continue walking through the exhibition. Most of the exhibited items are Kafka's letters and documents: his insurance licence, his request for sick leave, his application for a visa to go to Germany, and a letter he wrote to Milena, his lover. You find it bizarre that you and so many others have paid to see this. You enter another film room. The film that is showing is a visual

representation of *The Castle*. The film starts with the words *you are nothing* appearing in black text upon a pink background. That is the last thing you remember. You are jet-lagged. You fall asleep. When you wake up, the film has started over again and the words *you are nothing* appear in front of you once more. You leave the museum and wander the streets instead.

You buy a coffee and sit in a park near the Prague Castle, by the courtyard where they used to execute convicts. You see tourists eating Czech doughnut ice cream, taking selfies, and walking around the execution yard. You find this vaguely funny.

You are in a bookstore. You want to get a book you're sure Harold Li has never read. You decide on *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang. In part one, Mr. Cheong, a middle-aged man living in Korea, narrates the story of his wife becoming a vegetarian. He describes his wife as completely unremarkable. When he first meets her, he is not attracted to her at all, but that suits him just fine as he feels insecure around beautiful women. He also has a small penis. Mr. Cheong's goal is to live a completely unremarkable life. To him, an unremarkable wife is simply a component of such a life. One day, when he returns home, he finds his wife disposing of all meat products in the house. He asks her what's happening and she simply says she had a dream. Mr. Cheong, unable to convince her to touch meat ever again, calls her family over and they have an intervention. Her father, who served in Vietnam, is stern and forces her to eat a piece of pork while her brother and Mr. Cheong hold her down. She spits the pork out, grabs a knife, and slits her wrist. When she recovers, she leaves the hospital, takes off her shirt, and sits topless in a park. Mr. Cheong, who has been searching for her, rushes over and asks her what she is doing. She tells him simply that she is hot and then reveals, in her palm, a bird. She looks at the bird and asks if she has done something wrong.

You close the book and realize that you miss this—you miss waiting for her—the feeling that there is something to look forward to, that it is not only the present that matters. There is still time before you are supposed to meet her for dinner. You are already at the restaurant. You sit down, admiring the view of the Vltava River and Prague Castle. The two of you have decided not to have Czech food for dinner tonight. So you decide on an Italian restaurant that is on a boat.

You tell her the vegetarian story when she arrives, and she likes it. She suggests that you two should not have any meat tonight. You share an eggplant pizza with her as, not too far away, visible from where you are seated, the sun sets behind the execution yard.

Part III

The two of you walk back to the apartment from the restaurant. The old buildings that surround you exude an inimitable kind of aura, as if you are in a sad fairy tale, or rather, an Eastern European cartoon. Yes—walking among the old buildings in Prague makes you feel like you are in an Eastern European cartoon; the cartoon is made in the 1970s and you are a mouse who works as a detective. Your head is a triangle and your nose is a red dot. You have six whiskers, three on each side of your tiny red nose. On your head is a grey hat and you wear a matching trench coat. In this episode, the detective mouse wakes up in Prague with no memory of the night before. You consider asking her: *Why did you ask me to come? What are we doing? What does all of this mean?* You repeat the questions silently to yourself and realize you are afraid to know the answers. Instead, you ask:

“How old do you think these buildings are?”

“Some of them date back to the 1800s,” she says. “I’m glad you’re here, you know?” she continues, after a brief pause, her voice soft. “I’ve missed you.”

For a moment, you wish you could stay in Prague forever, leaving everything in Toronto behind. You realize there is nothing and no one awaiting your return. Your apartment is rented. You have no car. You know at least three qualified people who would gladly replace you at your job. You can continue being a freelance translator here. The rent is cheaper. You can travel to the rest of Europe whenever you like, take a bus to Germany for a weekend. Even a flight to Italy doesn’t cost that much. The idea of leaving everything excites you. Would she stay with you if you proposed this? Probably not. You feel a sudden breeze, which reminds you of the past few months—the months you spent alone—walking through the windy streets of

Toronto. *How difficult would it be to obtain a visa to live here?*
Probably very difficult. You put aside the thought of never returning to Toronto and suggest buying a bottle of wine before returning to the apartment.

Upon reaching your lodgings, you open the door and flick the light switch, but none of the lights turn on. Using the torch function on your phone, you try to assist her as she plays with the buttons in the electricity box. Nothing works. She tries contacting the owner of the place, who says she is out of town and won't be returning until Sunday night, two nights from now. In the meantime, she says, there are some candles in the closet the two of you can use.

You light the candles and place them around the bed while she opens the bottle of wine. The heater makes a rumbling noise when you try to turn it on but does not warm the room. The two of you are sitting on the floor, surrounded by candles, with blankets over your shoulders. The heater continues to rumble.

From your black suitcase, you take out the box of chocolate from SOMA. To your surprise, she is overjoyed with the gift, saying it is the perfect treat for a night like this. She rests her head on your shoulder and you place a piece of chocolate in her mouth.

"This is quite nice," she says. "I haven't felt like this in a while."

The heater doesn't care about the moment the two of you are having; as the two of you make love, it continues to rumble.

"I'm a mouse," you mutter.

"Hmm?" She asks. Her head is resting on your chest and she sounds a little tired. She falls asleep, and so do you.

I am a mouse in a seventies cartoon.

My head is triangular and my nose is a red dot.

I have six whiskers, three on each side of my tiny red nose.

I work as a detective.

I carry a magnifying glass with me.

I wear a grey hat and a matching trench coat.

The mouse detective wakes up in Prague. "*Is this a dream? Why am I here?*" There is no one around to answer the mouse's question, so the mouse walks around the city, searching for answers.

Again, you find yourself awake in the middle of the night. You kick the heater and the noise finally stops. But now your foot hurts. You take one of the candles and limp to the kitchen, where you eat a banana, feeling even more awake than you were last night. On the toilet seat, in the dark, you wonder what will happen after the two of you part, how much longer you will have to wait before seeing her again. You wonder if she ever feels like she is the one waiting. "Am I in love?—yes, since I am waiting. The other one never waits. Sometimes I want to play the part of the one who doesn't wait; I try to busy myself elsewhere, to arrive late, but I always lose at this game. Whatever I do, I find myself there, with nothing to do, punctual, even ahead of time. The lover's fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits" (Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*).

As you sit alone in the kitchen, you pour yourself all the wine that is left and drape a blanket over your shoulders. There is still no electricity and you are shivering. Your right foot hurts from kicking the heater. The sky is dark. You are waiting for the sun to rise, waiting for her to wake up. After taking another sip of wine, you close your eyes. The last time you fell asleep on a chair, you opened your eyes to the words *you are nothing* scrolling on a pink movie screen. *Prague has claws*, Kafka once wrote, *the only way to escape is to burn the city down*. You blow out the candle and your eyes close.

When you awaken, you are back in the bed. You both have a strong urge to wash each other's hair. The sky is now bright and the

apartment is a little warmer. You take turns washing each other's hair in cold water in the sink and immediately drying each other's hair with the towel so as not to catch a cold.

"We're going to need to stay here for another night," she says.
"But I really want to take a bath."

The two of you go to a café for some breakfast and to use the internet and charge your phones. She contacts Harold Li, asking if the two of you can use his hotel bathroom. He, of course, being the easygoing and successful dude that he is, says yes.

"He says he likes you," she says. "He told me during brunch, when you were in the washroom. He said he's never around people like you, that people like you interest him."

Part IV

Harold Li gives you a firm handshake, pulls you close, and pats you on the back with his left hand—a kind of handshake turned half hug, indicating that you guys are alright and he sees you as more than just a person he vaguely knows. You’re someone close enough to him for him to let you use his shower.

Harold Li is in a white bathrobe. His hotel suite has one king-sized bed and a colourful kitschy painting on the wall. The doorbell rings and a hotel staff member enters, brings Harold Li his dry-cleaned business suits and two sweaters and retrieves the tray. For some reason, the scene looks artificial—like he planned for that to happen at the exact moment the two of you arrive.

Harold Li apologizes for the hotel staff’s interruption and closes the door.

“Well, I’m going to take a bath, if it’s okay,” says your former girlfriend. She leaves you alone in the room with Harold Li, who asks you if you want to “check out the view from the balcony,” adding that the view is “pretty sick.” He hands you a beer from his mini-fridge and, before the two of you step outside, Harold Li asks, apologetically, if it’d be alright if he changes first. He turns around and takes off his bathrobe. He’s in his boxers. You stare at his ass. It’s tight—*he must do squats*. You wonder if he’s showing it off deliberately. You never do squats, and you sit in front of the computer all the time. Your ass is almost non-existent. Your ass is flat as a crepe. He puts on black pants, his Burberry belt, and a Missoni sweater (you can tell it’s Missoni because the pattern, like the pattern of his Burberry belt, screams its brand). You wonder if Harold Li thinks he’s living in some kind of commercial or lifestyle magazine. He puts on his aviators, at which point you want to punch this guy in the face. But you don’t. As he opens the door to his

balcony, you wonder why he moves as if every one of his actions is being photographed.

The real reason you don't punch him is because you still want to use his shower (and he'd probably kick your ass). Instead, you take a sip of beer. Cold. Good. Calming. Leaning against the balcony railing, you have to agree that the view is indeed "pretty sick." You are now on the balcony of the Dancing House Hotel—one of the first places that comes up if you google "sights to see in Prague"—a major tourist attraction. It's the kind of place you would go for a drink, but where you would never actually stay the night.

You chug some beer and stare at Harold Li as he leans over the balcony to stare at the streets. It's a little windy, and you catch the strong scent of Harold Li's cologne.

Because you've just consumed a half can of beer, you ask Harold Li, "Did you always want to live a life like this?"

"Interesting question. No one has ever asked me that before. You're an interesting guy, you know?"

You wonder why instead of answering you, he tells you what he thinks of you.

"I don't really know," he continues. "I guess I'm workin for a trading company now just because I'm capable of it. I never wanted anything, never really had any ambitions, I don't think. So I just kind of went with the flow. Does that make any sense?"

"Sure," you say.

"What about you? Did you always want to be a translator?"

You realize that, like Harold Li, you are doing something just because that is what you were allowed to do, that you are a translator simply because you were capable of being one. Both of you took the path of least resistance. You never really wanted anything, and here you are now, simply because you, like Harold Li, just "went with the flow." The realization that you have something so intimate in common with Harold Li irritates you.

"I heard you're working on a book," Harold Li asks, and takes off his shades. You are now seated across from each other in the suite's living room. "I don't mean to probe, but I was curious. What is your book about?"

It is about her—you don't say this. You cannot bring yourself to say it; you are no longer together, no longer a couple. Such an answer would make you seem pitiful. The last thing you want is pity from Harold Li. "It's about a mouse who happens to be a detective," you say. "It has a rectangular head and a red dot for a nose."

Harold Li looks at you, trying to decide if you're being serious.

"I'm kidding," you say.

He laughs. "Seriously, what is your book about. I'm curious."

You recite to him a paragraph from the proposal you sent to your agent, adding words like *autofiction*, *experimentalism*, and *magic realism*, for no reason other than to make your book sound more like a book (and maybe to confuse him).

"Fascinating," is Harold Li's response. "Has this been inspiring—this Prague trip?"

"Yes. The day before, a clown asked me to stab him," you say. "I think I'm going to write about that."

Harold Li gives you a look—the same confused look he gave you when you told him you translate the words that go on the backs of shampoo bottles. Harold Li chuckles. "Interesting things happen to you, don't they? I'm almost jealous."

Hearing Harold Li say that gives you chills. "Jealous?"

"No clown ever told me to stab him. Nothing strange ever happens to me. Everything is just a straight line for me, you know? I went to private school, then Duke, did internships over the summers, and, immediately after graduating, started working for a trading company. I never freelanced. My parents are well off, so I never had a student loan I needed to pay off. Never had a part-time job either. A straight line. No obstacles whatsoever. So, I'm jealous

of you. You're the kind of guy who doesn't care what's expected of you. You just do things at your own pace, know what I mean?"

You wonder for a moment if he is being patronizing, showing off his perfect life. But in his tone, you sense sincerity. This ability of his, to speak between the lines of sincerity and mockery, makes you jealous.

Your ex-girlfriend enters the living room. She is freshened up, hair tied into a bun. You finish your beer and go take a shower. When you return, they are high. You go to the balcony and light a joint.

"Hello," she says. "How was your shower?" She hugs you from behind. Her face is a little red.

Before you can answer, she kisses you on the cheek and returns to the living room. It is around three in the afternoon, and the streets are busy. You watch as people hop on and off the streetcars. You are here because you needed to take a shower; because, unlike you, Harold Li works for a trading company and has stable access to electricity.

You finish the joint and return to the living room. Harold Li is sitting in an armchair. You sit next to your ex on the couch and she places her head on your lap. "This is comfortable," she says.

"Every time I go on a business trip like this," Harold Li continues, "they tell me to spend more, to use my expense account. So I ordered some champagne. I hope that's alright with you two."

"Sure," she says.

Harold Li goes to the fridge, smoothly removes the foil, loosens the wire cage, drapes a towel over the bottle, and, in one graceful motion, twists the bottom of the bottle so that the cork gently eases out.

"Impressive," you say. This is the first and only compliment you will ever give Harold Li.

"I'm sorry?"

"You opened it so smoothly."

"Oh," he chuckles, a little embarrassed. "I'm usually the guy who opens the bottles at parties, you know?"

You once fucked up a date because it took so long for you to open a bottle of champagne. You invited her to your tiny apartment and the night ended with her asleep on your couch and you staring at an opened bottle of champagne on the table. She never called you again.

"Cheers!" says your former girlfriend. And the three of you drink up.

At around five, you find yourself yawning. "Would you like to leave soon?" you ask her.

"Sure. I'm just going to take a quick shower, if that's okay. I don't want to smell like smoke tonight."

She leaves the room, and Harold Li asks what your plans are for tonight.

"I'm not sure. We might just eat somewhere and go back to our dark apartment."

"Romantic." You can't tell if Harold Li is being sarcastic or not.

"Have you read *The Vegetarian*?" you ask.

"Excuse me?"

"The novel *The Vegetarian*. Have you read it?"

"No. Is it any good?"

"I like it," you say. "I've only read the first part, but it's quite interesting." You give him a summary and he seems genuinely interested.

"Huh, so that's the kind of stuff that sells these days," is Harold Li's response.

"What do you mean by 'kind of stuff'?" you ask.

"Weird, surreal, feminist stories that make a mockery of the ignorance of men. Trendy stuff." He sips his champagne.

"I think there's more to it than—"

"I'm sure there is," he says, cutting you off. "But a book like that is so easy to market, you know what I mean? It's obviously written for middle-aged women who are unhappy with their lives. A great target audience. They have time, money, and the emotional vulnerability that requires art and culture to fill a void. Give the book a vibrant coloured cover, make it win an award or two, and then, *wala!* All there is left to do is sit tight and wait for the cash to flood in."

You are lost for words.

Harold Li continues, "You said the book is narrated by the husband, right?"

"Yes."

"And he's irritated by his wife acting strangely?"

"He is."

"Brilliant! Men who are frustrated by feminists would buy the book as well! People think these books are transgressive and whatnot, but in reality, it's just about appealing to the ideologies that are fashionable at the time. If you play your cards right, you profit. That's how the world works. She's a Korean writer from a small city that no one's ever heard of, and now, her books are being sold in Prague! You see how far you can get by knowing how to play the game?"

Before you can respond, your ex-girlfriend returns and all the attention in the room shifts toward her. She simply says, "Let's go!" picks up her purse, puts on her coat, thanks Harold Li, and leaves. You thank Harold Li and he gives you another handshake hug and a "Later, bruh."

Part V

"What was the first impression you had of me?"

"Why do you ask?" she says, placing a napkin on her lap.

You are seated at a restaurant next door to the apartment.

"Did I seem to you like a guy who just does things at his own pace and doesn't care about what other people expect of me?"

"I don't know," she replies. "Never thought of that. When I met you, I just thought you were a nice guy. You were very put together—organized, clean, patient—everything I wasn't at the time." There is a pause. Sensing she has more to say, you remain quiet. Someone opens the restaurant door; a young couple enters and an old couple leaves. A woman laughs. You look over. "We never talked about this when we were together," she finally says. Your attention shifts back to her. "Do you have any ambitions? You're not going to be a translator your whole life, right?"

"Of course not."

"Then what would you like to do?"

You've never told anyone this, because this idea just came to you when Harold Li was attributing the success of *The Vegetarian* to Han Kang, the author, "playing her cards right." "When a minority writer becomes successful," you say, "critics in the West often call them 'a new voice' or whatever. There is a writing tradition behind her choice of form and style; simply calling it 'new' is undermining that. I think I want to design syllabi. I don't know if I want to teach but I think I'd like to do research and design courses for schools. High school, universities—it doesn't matter. Maybe one day I can create a syllabus with only writers of colour."

"I think you'd need to have at least one token straight white guy though. He doesn't have to be *good* either."

"Who do you recommend?" you ask.

"Who's that guy that Hitler liked reading? The Norwegian guy who won the Nobel Prize?"

"Hamsun?"

"Yes! The token white guy in your syllabus should be Hitler's favourite writer. You can spend the class explaining to your students why Hitler liked him so much."

You consider her proposal for a moment. You imagine a class where the syllabus consists of only a white man: a Norwegian Nazi. "I think that's too much," you say. "Maybe he should be someone more recent and a little less obviously problematic."

"Do you have anyone in mind?" she asks.

"Kazuo Ishiguro," you say. "My favourite straight white guy."

The waiter comes over and you place your order. You decide on duck confit with steamed vegetables, and she decides on grilled salmon and beet salad. You remember that on one of your first dates, she ordered beet salad for lunch. It was a sunny afternoon in winter, and she was wearing a purple sweater that matched her salad. You think of the day you first met her, trying to reimagine the first time you saw her face. You blush. Today, three years since you first met, you still blush thinking of that day. You are embarrassed by your blushing, and that makes you blush even more. You feel your ears reddening.

"Do you want to know my first impression of you?" you ask her.

"Tell me."

"I thought you were cute, probably the cutest."

"That's nice of you to say." She's starting to blush a little too, you notice. "I thought you were cute too," she continues. "There were a lot of guys at the party that night, you know? I got so many free drinks before I met you."

"I know."

"So, what else did you think of me?" she asks.

"I noticed immediately that you really knew how to read social cues, knew when to sip your drink at the right time, and knew the right moments to laugh. I could tell that you were brought up well—probably went to a private school and spoke at least two languages and played a classical instrument. You also dressed well, but nothing too much or over the top. You were able to fit right in, but at the same time you stood out. Oh, and you smelled really nice."

She chuckles. The waiter comes over with the food. She doesn't pick up her utensils. She focuses on you, waiting for you to continue.

"You were clumsy though. I remember you walking over, offering to buy me a drink," you say. "You were already kind of drunk. All you had in your wallet was a twenty-dollar bill that was ripped in half. You handed me half of the bill and told me to get two of whatever I was having. When I asked where the other half of the bill was, you were embarrassed, so I ended up paying for the drinks."

"I do not recall such an incident," she says, pretending to be interrogated. "I don't recall such an incident happening at all. I think you are creating fabricated narratives to embarrass me, and I find such fabrications extremely distasteful."

"Madam, I assure you that the incident did occur—and I have with me evidence." You pull the half bill out from your wallet. She takes it from your hand and inspects it. The waiter comes over, asking if the two of you would like anything else to drink. She says she'll have whatever you're having, and, when the waiter leaves, she hands you back the half twenty-dollar bill. Though an imperfect re-enactment of the original scene, you feel the same way you felt three years ago. You recall the times the two of you would spend entire afternoons watching old films when it snowed.

Back at the apartment, the two of you brush your teeth and wash your faces with cold water. The bathroom is illuminated by two lavender-scented candles.

"At least it smells nice," she says.

You return to the bedroom. The room is cold. You blow out the candles and hold each other in bed, sleeping until the sun rises.

Part VI

"Good morning." She is lying on your chest. "Did you miss me?"

You put your arms around her, holding her tightly. "When will I see you again?" you ask.

"Tonight," she says, her eyes closed. "Pick a restaurant, and I'll meet you there for dinner. I have to be back at the studio this afternoon." She leaves the bed; you watch as she applies perfume to her neck and puts on clothes. She turns around. You keep your eyes on her as she walks closer. She kisses you, then leaves the room.

You spend the day wondering if she still loves you, wondering if the two of you will be together again. After washing your face with cold water and shaving, you leave the apartment, get some coffee, and decide to spend the morning walking along the Vltava river. There are trees, but no leaves. Birds are chirping. An old man is smoking; his dog barks at you. The owner gives you a look. The grass is dry and colourless. The dog continues to bark at you. The dog is a racist. You stop by the bookstore where you bought *The Vegetarian* and ask the owner why he'd decided to import this book, and whether the book is selling. He tells you that he brought in a few copies and knows of it because it won the Man Booker Prize.

"Only three copies have been sold," he tells you.

"Do you remember the two others who bought them?"

"I think they're Vietnamese immigrants," he says. "Both of them women."

When you step outside, you see the clown again. He is wearing the same red costume, standing near a bakery, holding the same ruby-encrusted knife. Tourists walk past the clown without looking at him, but the clown doesn't give up, asking every passerby to stab him.

"Young sir," the clown says to you. "Konichiwa."

"Yes?" This time you don't bother telling him you're not Japanese.

"Would you care to stab me?"

Without thinking about it, you take the knife from him and stab the clown in the chest. Why you do that, you do not know. The act is reflexive. There is a pause. The clown keeps his head down, staring at the knife and hand. You notice people around you looking. A part of you wants to pull the knife out and stab him again. Instead, you let go of the knife. The clown looks up and smiles—his teeth yellow. He pulls out the knife, revealing a costume stuffed with cotton.

"Thank you, sir," he says. "How did that feel? Good? Please, if you like, sir. Stab me once more."

"I think I'm okay. Thanks."

"Very well." The clown takes out a roll of red tape from his pocket and sticks the part of the costume you stabbed back together. He takes off his hat—his head is bald. "Tip?" You give him all the change you have in your pocket. You have no idea how much you are giving him, but the clown seems pleased. "I hope to see you again, sir."

"Wait. If you don't mind me asking, why do you ask people to stab you?"

"I'm sorry, but I must continue my work." The clown turns away and asks an old couple to stab him. They, of course, ignore the clown and continue walking.

The fact that the clown describes what he does as "work" puzzles you. To Harold Li, you seem odd, a person who doesn't care about other people's expectations, someone who does things at his own pace. Compared to the clown, however, you feel as if you and Harold Li are in the same category. Actually, to the racist dog, the two of you aren't that different either. The dog would probably be even

more aggressive toward Harold because of the strong scent of his cologne.

You approach a cathedral where there is a performance by the City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra underway; you decide to go in.

"The performance has already started. If you want to go in, sit in the balcony."

Being performed are mainstream pieces everyone knows—Vivaldi, Mozart, Bach, etc. You pay and a moment later you are the only person sitting in the balcony. The orchestra is performing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, "Autumn." You stare at the ceiling of the cathedral. God and his angels stare back. The angels are all topless, muscular men with long curly hair. You are reminded that you were raised Christian. (You sometimes forget.) You do not consider yourself a Christian any longer, but being in this church makes you worry, for a moment, that you will go to Hell for your faithlessness. At the same time, you know you are no longer a Christian because you believe that most problems and injustices in the world are caused by Christianity and colonization, that the two go hand in hand. You are sometimes ashamed that you went to a Christian private school. Actually, you went to two—one in Hong Kong and one in Niagara Falls. You have never told your parents that you will never be baptized. Staring at the ceiling makes you feel vulnerable, reminds you that, if you denounce your faith to your parents, your parents will think they did a terrible job raising you. They will be disappointed in both you and themselves. The music crescendos. You stare at God. He does not seem to care about your conundrum. *This must be how Kafka felt when he said Prague had claws and he was unable to escape.* You wonder if Kafka was religious. You wonder if, beneath his beard, God is laughing at you, if God laughed at Kafka. All of a sudden, you realize how good it felt to stab the clown. To have another living person offer you a knife and ask you

to stab him is unusual, but to stab someone is a fantasy you think everyone has once in a while. You begin to have a strange kind of respect for the clown's "work." If Jesus dying on the cross is sacrificing himself for your sins, then what does it mean for a clown to ask you to stab him? In a way, on a personal level at least, the clown did more for you than Jesus did.

Listening to classical music and being in a church overwhelms you. You decide to leave before the concert ends. You never left a church service early when you were a child. Arriving to the concert late and leaving early is liberating.

A few minutes later, you are having a bagel while searching for a place to have dinner. You decide you want live music and reserve a table at a restaurant with a jazz band—it's called Jazz Boat. *A restaurant floating in the middle of the river, Jazz Boat is the perfect place for a quiet dinner*, reads one of the comments (obviously written by someone who works there). You message her, telling her to meet you at the restaurant at six, and she replies with a thumbs-up emoji followed by a smiley face. You send her a heart—it's marked as *read* but there is no reply. An hour or so later, she texts you saying the landlord has returned and has called the electricity company to fix the power.

Across the street, you see the concert has ended and people are leaving the cathedral. You decide to go back inside to stare at God's face again. You go in and sit on the main floor, in front of the altar, before a row of statues, all of them holding golden rods and staffs, gazing down upon you. *Are they trying to scare people into becoming Christian?* The feeling you have sitting under these statues is not fear but guilt—because you've sinned, your mother would probably tell you. You might not be the best person ever, but you don't consider yourself sinful. You don't think you deserve to go to Hell. You think it would be even more shameful to conform to a religion you find problematic and betray everything you believe in

just because you fear going to Hell. Rather than considering yourself a sinner and starting to pray for forgiveness, like a good church boy, you become angry—angry at everything around you, angry at your religious upbringing, mad at the fact that this church, built in the 1700s, is still standing.

The image of Harold Li pops into your mind: you see him partying with Lindsay Lohan and biking to work in New York City. You blame your upbringing for making you the boring person you are now. You have been taught to be kind, to not have sex until marriage, to not smoke weed, to not be gay, that drinking is bad, that love is patient and kind, and all that other bullshit. You are the one who always waits because you are Christian. You are a Christian; that is why you are now sitting in a church, waiting for her to get off work. Though you don't actually mind it, you also hate it—hate the fact you don't mind, hate yourself for allowing a religion that you despise to still distort your personality. You blame your upbringing, the British colonizers who made your Burmese grandfather a Christian. You blame the semi-British, Christian conservative, bullshit school system you were educated under in Hong Kong for nine years. You hate the fact that white people are more respected in Asia. You hate the British corporate culture that dominates that city. You hate the pollution. You blame colonization *for everything*. You blame the Church of England. You blame Great Fucking Britain for the fact that you are with the woman you love, in a romantic city, but do not know if the relationship can continue. You blame all of those things for the situation you are in today. If she doesn't love you back, you decide, it will be the fault of the fucking Queen.

It is time to leave.

The clown is still there, standing on the street, asking people to stab him. You continue walking, back to the riverside—not too far from the restaurant. The dog that barked at you this morning is now

gone. Somewhere, a driver honks their horn. A baby is crying. The sound of the shutter of a camera. Laughter. A sneeze. You take a deep breath and then another. In your mind, you count to ten when you inhale and exhale slowly—something you learned from your therapist. Birds are chirping; wind moves the grass below you and bells on streetcars ring.

You open your eyes.

After using your phone as a mirror to fix your hair, you tell the hostess your name.

“Thank you, sir. Your date has already arrived. Please, follow me.”

To your surprise, you see her, sitting at the table at the end of the boat, patiently waiting for you. The band is playing a soft tune. She’s not on her phone, not reading a book. She is sitting next to the window. She is in the same tight blue dress you helped her zip up this morning. She is waiting. Her back is perfectly straight. She is leaning forward slightly, with her arms on the table. She looks out the window, at the view. It is dusk, and a glimmer of sunlight shines through the windowpane. She raises her hand above her forehead, blocking the rays. You stare at the image. The restaurant is warm and the waiters are lighting the candles on each table. You feel calmness within—a smooth pebble landing in your heart, on a spot that has never been touched.

“Hi,” you say, sitting down. Your voice cracks a little.

“Hi.”

“I’m leaving the day after tomorrow,” you say.

“I’ll miss you.”

“Are we going to do that *Before Sunrise* shit? Like how they promise each other that they’ll not talk before they meet again?”

She laughs. “We’ll meet again,” she says.

The waiter comes over and lights the candle on your table. You look outside; the water is still. She gives you her hand and you hold

it. The band starts playing "Moon River." It's a little cheesy for your taste, but in that moment, you don't mind.

After dinner, you will walk back to the apartment with her, where the first thing you do will be to turn on your light switch.

~End~

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To view the artwork of the German artist Metis, please visit
www.instagram.com/metisatash/ and www.metisatash.com/.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my primary advisor, Kyo Maclear, who helped me develop this manuscript, and Professor Elaine Chang, my secondary advisor, for your valuable feedback. I also want to extend my thanks to my instructors from the University of Guelph's MFA program, Catherine Bush, Russell Smith, and Sky Gilbert, as well as all my fellow writers in the fiction workshops, Oubah Osman, Hajar Mirwali, Kaitlin Ruether, Greg Rhyno, Rebecca Kelly, Simone Dalton, Tala Gedeon Achi, and Ashish Seth, for your valuable feedback and words of encouragement throughout the program.

Thank you to those of you at Book*hug, Hazel Millar, Jay Millar, and my editor, Malcolm Sutton, for taking a chance on this novel.

A special thank-you to Elizabeth Heinricks, who is often the first one to read my first drafts. Thank you, Elizabeth, for all the thoughtful feedback, edits, and reassurance you've given me over the years.

My deepest gratitude goes to my family, mother, father, and sister, for your continuous and unparalleled love, help, and support. I am forever indebted to all of you.

And finally, a very special thank-you to M, whose intelligence, curiosity, and love of good food inspired the character "You."

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SHEUNG-KING is a writer and educator. His work has appeared in *PRISM International*, *The Shanghai Literary Review*, and *The Humber Literary Review*, among others. *You Are Eating an Orange. You Are Naked.* is Sheung-King's debut book. Sheung-King grew up in Hong Kong and lives in Toronto.

PHOTO: MAARI SUGAWARA

Colophon

Manufactured as the first edition of
You Are Eating an Orange. You Are Naked. in the fall of 2020 by
Book*hug Press

Edited for the press by Malcolm Sutton
Copy edited by Stuart Ross
Type + design by Malcolm Sutton
Cover image by Maari Sugawara

bookhugpress.ca

Book*hug Press